

Counter-traditionalist

Susan Sontag, 1933–2004

In the prefatory note to her first collection of critical writings, *Against Interpretation* (1966), Susan Sontag reflected that ‘in the end, what I have been writing is not criticism at all, strictly speaking, but case studies for an aesthetic, a theory of my own sensibility’. The statement holds true for all her work, as does the seriousness with which it is issued. For all the diversity of topics and shifting positions in Sontag’s writings over forty years, there remained a constant, centring, perception of writing as a project of self-discovery and self-invention. This is an intellectual project she frequently identified, and identified with, in the work on others, perhaps most notably Roland Barthes, about whom she wrote on several occasions.

In her 1966 introduction to the American edition of Barthes’s *Writing Degree Zero*, Sontag asserts: ‘Only if the ideal of criticism is enlarged to take in a wide variety of discourse, both theoretical and descriptive, about culture, language and contemporary consciousness, can Barthes plausibly be called a critic.’ Fifteen years later, in her introduction to a collection of Barthes’s writings, she expanded on her appreciation of his ‘multiple identifications’ to argue that his work

consists of continuities and detours; the accumulation of points of view; finally, their disburdenment: a mixture of progress and caprice.... The writer’s freedom that Barthes describes is, in part, flight. The writer is the deputy of his own ego – of that self in perpetual flight from what is fixed by writing, as the mind is in perpetual flight from doctrine.

Sontag’s writing is similarly self-cancelling, most obviously in the essays where she writes an antithetical criticism, though all of her writings take up this stance and taken together make up a complex intellectual autobiography. This self-cultivation, very much a mixture of ‘progress and caprice’, presumes a privileged modernist birthright and an expansive conception of the critical and cultural work of the intellectual.

If there is an intellectual role Sontag self-consciously performed in her very public career it was that of the generalist or ‘writer-intellectual’. Her free-ranging studies of thought and culture covered such subjects as happenings, camp, science-fiction films, pornographic literature, photography, fascist aesthetics, cancer, AIDS, opera, dance, translation – to pick only the better-known examples – and she was fond of saying she was ‘interested in everything – and nothing else’. Explicitly endorsing the generalist model, Sontag acknowledged both American and European influences, though the European tended greatly to outweigh the American. (‘There is a terrible, mean American resentment toward a writer who tries to do many things’, she once grumbled.) Sontag’s notion of generalism was at one with an insistence upon autonomy, and she idealized the conception of the intellectual as a free-floating commentator on the general culture, unaffiliated to specific interest groups or institutions. Sontag could sound pious about this idea of the intellectual and her own relation to it, but few if any Americans sought to live it as a vocation in the way she did, to the point of iconic caricature as ‘The Last Intellectual’. The high-minded idealism of her dissenting approach is evident not only in her cultural criticism but also in her political activities. In her controversial visits to Vietnam, Cuba and Bosnia, as in her prominent involvement

in international organizations such as PEN – responding to issues of human rights, censorship and freedom of expression – she championed the role of the writer-intellectual as a critical conscience of a larger populace. Sontag's modes of intellectual address and appeal presumed the existence of a broad, educated audience responsive to a rationalizing critical voice – a presumption that proved difficult to sustain as America's political and cultural publics fragmented during her career.

Sontag's assumptions about the transcendent imperatives of intellect register her identification with ideas and ideals of high European modernism. Her great themes of melancholic self-reflection, self-ennervation and intellectual exile owe much to her admiration of individual modernists: the fiction of Kafka, Beckett and Sarraute, the cinema of Godard, Bergman and Syberberg, the theatre of Artaud, and the intellectual projects of Benjamin, Cioran, Canetti and Barthes. Sontag frequently invoked such cultural heroes as an imaginative community of intellect and exemplars of a fractured counter-tradition of modernist thought. Her interest in ambitious artistic and intellectual projects reflects in part her fascination with the idea of consciousness *in extremis*. In her formally severe early fictions she explored degenerated or exalted states of consciousness; her characters are often involved in acts of 'mental disembowelment'.

In many essays she is drawn to the phenomenology of style or temperament in the writers she admires. The 'mind as passion' and the body in pain are central motifs. Her last published book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, considers how images of war and violence mediate our responses to human suffering. Reading Sontag, certain modernist terms of value recur: the negative, the transcendent, the transgressive, the authentic, the difficult, the silent. The urge to negate shapes the style as well as the content; she favours disjunctive forms of argument; aphoristic and epigrammatic modes of critical expression are widely applied. Throughout her career she was both a searching critic and mournful elegist of 'the decline of the new'. Her writings explore moral and political consequences of the breakup of modernist culture, searching out its meanings in the most general subjects – such as photography and illness – as well as in specific artistic and intellectual practices.

Although most of Sontag's heroes are European, she should nonetheless be understood as an American intellectual in the sense that she developed her public role within the specific intellectual culture of New York in the second half of the twentieth century. Sontag tells of a childhood dream of writing for *Partisan Review* and was already intimate with the writing habits and arguments of writers grouped around this seminal magazine by the time she arrived in New York in 1959. In the middle of the twentieth century, New York intellectual culture was receptive to generalists – Edmund Wilson, Paul Goodman and Harold Rosenberg were prominent examples. Most wrote for the moment and showed a stylistic preference for the essay form. They had a strong sense of European cultural models (partly due to the Jewish inheritance many shared), which nourished their cosmopolitan sense of culture. And though they did not produce distinct theoretical or methodological legacies, they revolutionized the concept and practice of cultural criticism in ways still not generally recognized. They promoted the *activity* of critical inquiry as an ideal of contention and interventionism, seeking an immediate relation to public issues. Sontag's early intellectual formation and activity were deeply influenced by critical and ideological tenets of the postwar generation of New York intellectuals. However, her writings also existed in tension with them, and many came to see her as a symbol of the group's 'decline' since the 1960s (see Irving Howe, 'The New York Intellectuals', in his *Decline of the New*, Gollancz, London, 1971).

In the period after World War II, the New Yorkers sought to come to terms with an American modernity that was fast outpacing their efforts to interpret it. Rejecting the Balkanization of 'high' and 'mass' culture common to New York intellectual debates,

Sontag promoted a new artistic pluralism and eclecticism that reflected a 'new sensibility' of cultural production and critical taste emerging in early 1960s' America. Sontag's efforts to map her own intellectual influences and tastes would provide a partial yet influential guide to the breakup of the liberal cultural consensus that held sway in the New York intellectual world. 'Notes on Camp' (1964) became a famed example of this process, as it celebrated an 'aesthetic sensibility' that offered an ironic and fugitive approach to the 'culturally over-saturated' experience of American modernity. Like so much of her early writing, it promoted a new critical consciousness of the long-established dialectical relationship between modernism and mass culture. Sontag's essays had a major intellectual and cultural impact in the mid-1960s. It owed much to the transgressive charge of her writings as they worked across conventionalized boundaries tacitly separating literary and visual cultures, moral and aesthetic ideas, and intellectual and bodily pleasures. Reviewers were quick to identify her as an intellectual 'swinger', a barometer of all that was radically chic in New York intellectual culture, 'a representative advanced consciousness'. And with her image adorning leading magazines she was widely depicted as the very face of the Zeitgeist. Writing in *Partisan Review* in 1969, its editor William Phillips referred to Sontag as 'a premature legend' and noted that 'the standard picture is that of the up-to-date radical, a stand-in for everything advanced, extreme and outrageous'. This picture framed Sontag for many years to come.



Closer (and later) reading of Sontag's early writings show her to be much more ambivalent about the new sensibility arts than critics were prepared to note. The 'theory of [her] own sensibility' that she was scripting through the act of cultural criticism was certainly more nuanced than the popular image Phillips refers to. Though championing strands of iconoclastic modernism in these writings, Sontag was also ambivalent about acting as an advocate or exponent of the new. On the camp sensibility, for example, she was equivocal, referring to 'a deep sympathy modified by revulsion'. This is also to say she was already wary about promoting an aesthetic sensibility at the expense of moral and social claims. In the later 1960s and 1970s she became more reflective and less exhortatory about the endgames of modernist culture; she interrogated the assumptions underlying the progressive avant-gardist movement towards 'the most excruciating inflections of consciousness' and became more and more sceptical, even alarmed, about ideas of social change drawing on aesthetic principles of negation, transcendence or transgression.

By the mid-1970s she was wary of 'over-generalizing the aesthetic view of the world' and deliberately distanced herself from what she saw as the commercial incorporation of modernist energies. This wariness is most evident in her writings on photography in this period. When she claims that the aestheticism of 'photographic seeing' is a generalized form of a once elitist taste, she is reviewing her treatment of camp, lamenting that 'we now make a history out of our detritus', not just an art. Sontag's repeated emphasis on the atomized, dissociated experience of photographic seeing as fully habituated to the logic of late capitalism articulates her sense that the image world threatens the very conditions for critical thought. *On Photography* is a brilliant, diagnostic meditation on

aesthetic, moral and political implications of photographic seeing; it is also an uneasy, personal act of intellectual negation.

In the 1970s and 1980s Sontag resisted the claims of a radically new 'postmodern' culture in favour of examining what remained of the modernist tradition – of its asceticism and powers of negation – at a time when it had been 'stripped ... of its claims as an adversary sensibility'. One consequence of this is that the elegiac note is strengthened, brought to the fore, lending her perspective on modernist ambitions an undercurrent of pathos and intensifying her sense of writing at 'a late moment in culture'. A strong sense of an ending courses through all of her work, at times veering towards the apocalyptic, at others toward the melancholic. In a 1967 essay on E.M. Cioran she had written of her 'sense of standing in the ruins of thought and on the verge of the ruins of history and of man himself.... More and more, the shrewdest thinkers and artists are precocious archeologists of these ruins-in-the-making.' The apocalyptic note sounded here tends to give way in her writings of the 1970s and 1980s to melancholy reflectiveness, and these 'ruins' take on a fuller allegorical significance. Sontag's fascination with the 'melancholic temperament' connects the portraits of artists and thinkers – Goodman, Artaud, Benjamin, Syberberg and Barthes – gathered in *Under the Sign of Saturn* (1980). She was both mourner and custodian of these ambitions, and dismissive of the 'facile eclecticism of contemporary taste' – what she identifies in *On Photography* as the false intellectual economy and indiscriminate pluralism of a consumerized modernism.

Sontag's writings on photography (and on illness) in the 1970s registered an uncertainty about the parameters and functions of a public liberal culture. As this concern became more acute in the 1980s, her strong sense of her writings as a 'project', a self-absorbing cultural criticism, seemed to stall during a period when she had to reassess the relationship between her writing, her culture and her audience. Throughout the 1980s she sought a wider distribution of her energies away from essay writing, with the signal exception of *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989). In the views of some commentators, Sontag began moving towards the political right in this period, but this is a misreading of her intellectual trajectory; in some part it was the very continuity of her cultural and political perspectives that caused her to attract the conservative label. If perceptions of her conservatism were overstated, this owed something to the major repatterning of intellectual politics in the USA in the 1980s. What Sontag found slipping away from her in the 1980s was any strong sense of an intellectual community, and issues of intellectual legitimation and direction hover around her work in this period. When she ventured towards the front lines of contemporary cultural politics in the United States – most notably with her essays on AIDS – her self-projection as a public intellectual addressing a general culture met with considerable criticism. With AIDS she had a subject about which she felt strongly and which called on her modernist outlook as a defining issue, a locus of multiple cultural, social and political resentments and anxieties. In 1986 she approached the subject in the form of a short story, 'The Way We Live Now', published in *The New Yorker*, giving powerful and poignant expression to 'the universe of fear in which everyone now lives'. In 1989 she published *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, which advanced the analytical and diagnostic reasoning of *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) to the study of discourses surrounding AIDS. Once again she sought to 'de-mythicize' disease in a strenuous moral effort to expose and resist the metaphorization of illness as judgement, and once again her approach is characteristically rationalist – an austere, dispassionate meditation – claiming she hoped to 'calm the imagination'. The tone and perspective annoyed many reviewers, though, who charged that she was too detached from her subject and wilfully ignorant of the cultural politics of AIDS activism.

One arena Sontag found suited to renewing her sense of intellectual vocation was the international forums dealing with issues of human rights and freedom of expression. International writers' gatherings were not new, but in the 1980s they blossomed as never before and Sontag became a familiar participant. A founder member of PEN American Center, she became its president in 1986, and was a strong advocate of the idea that the act of writing is a political (even a life-and-death) matter. Such a view was very much in accord with her long-held beliefs in the writer as a vanguardist voice of dissent and conscience. Sontag's commitments to the international writers' community and the politics of conscience kept alive the ideas of autonomy and responsibility she associated with public thinking. Throughout the 1990s and into the new century she seemed especially energized by issues of conflict and conscience and lent passionate support to several causes. Most famously, she publicly questioned the Clinton administration's handling of the crisis in the former Yugoslavia and spent several months in Sarajevo when the city was under siege. Whilst there she directed a local production of *Waiting for Godot*. There was much mockery of her actions among American commentators, but also considerable admiration and support. The mayor of Sarajevo has announced that the city will name a street after Sontag.

With her interest in the essay form diminished, Sontag turned her energies to fiction in the 1990s, saying she longed to explore the pleasures of narrative. Two early novels, *The Benefactor* (1963) and *Death Kit* (1967) had received mixed reviews and were overshadowed by the essays. Although she continued to write short stories it was not until 1992 that her third novel, *The Volcano Lover*, was published, followed in 2000 by *In America*. At first sight these novels appear surprising departures from anything she had written. *The Volcano Lover* is a historical romance: its subject is the infamous love triangle between Sir William Hamilton, Emma Hamilton and Horatio Nelson; and its central setting is late-eighteenth-century Naples. *In America* is also a historical romance, telling the tale of a Polish actress who emigrates to the United States in the 1870s, travels to California to join a commune, changes her identity and becomes a celebrated stage actress. With both novels Sontag seems to have been genuinely enthralled by the worlds of the narratives and keen to engage the reader in the passions she describes, but these are also metafictional in their self-conscious treatment of the genre and references to contemporary as well as historical issues. They are freighted with ideas, filled with mini-essays on the making of European and American modernities. They almost become compendiums of Sontag's intellectual interests. With *The Volcano Lover*, for example, she explores the historical roots of the 'aesthetic sensibility' she has long been both fascinated and appalled by, and in the figure of Hamilton critically portrays a destructive imperialism masquerading as melancholic connoisseurship. While Sontag wants us to believe in her novels as historical melodramas, they also function as dramaturgies of ideas and, more obliquely, as allegorizations of conflicts in her self-identification as a modernist intellectual.

The Volcano Lover and *In America* were generally well received, with the latter winning the National Book Award in 2000. She was working on another novel when she died. There is little immediate doubt, though, that she will be best remembered for her essays and for her passionate performance of the role of the public intellectual. The passion was certainly not diminished in her final years. In the aftermath of 9/11 she was subject to a media backlash and received death threats when she described the terrorist attacks as a 'consequence' of American actions and decried the 'unanimity of the sanctimonious, reality-concealing rhetoric spouted by American officials and media commentators' (*The New Yorker*, 24 September 2001). And yet there remains some doubt about how she will be 'positioned' in cultural histories of late-twentieth-century America.

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