



# Notes on Susan Sontag

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## Notes for an investigation.

"We know more than we can use. Look at all this stuff I've got in my head: rockets and Venetian churches, David Bowie and Diderot, nuoc mam and Big Macs, sunglasses and orgasms. How many newspapers and magazines do you read? For me, they're what candy or Quaaludes or scream therapy are for my neighbors. I get my daily ration from the bilious Lincoln Brigade veteran who runs a tobacco shop on 110<sup>th</sup> street, not from the blind news agent in the wooden pillbox on Broadway, who's nearer my apartment.

And we don't know nearly enough."

"Debriefing" from I, etcetera.

"There are certain eras which are too complex, too deafened by contradictory historical and intellectual experiences, to hear the voice of sanity. Sanity becomes compromise, evasion, a lie. Ours is an age which consciously pursues health, and yet only believes in the reality of sickness. The truths we respect are those born of affliction." on Simone Weil 1963

"The culture-heroes of our liberal bourgeois civilization are anti-liberal and anti-bourgeois; they are writers who are repetitive, obsessive and impolite, who impress by force – not simply by their tone of personal authority and by their intellectual ardor, but by the sense of acute personal and intellectual extremity. The bigots, the hysterics, the destroyers of the self – these are the writers who bear witness to the fearful polite time in which we live."



PHOTO: HARRY HESS

"Susan Sontag is easily the most controversial critic writing in America today....she has a great deal to say that is important and enriching...and she says it with economy and a directness that can rise to eloquence."

—Eliot Fremont-Smith, *The New York Times*

"...the most serious young writer we have in America.... She goes out on limbs, takes stands, commits her intelligence with an urgency and authority."

—*Life*

These exciting and widely debated essays which the author calls "case studies for an aesthetic," include discussions of Camus, Sartre, Genet, Simone Weil, Ionesco, Brecht, Peter Weiss, Beckett, Arthur Miller, Godard, Resnais, *Underground Movies*, *Psychoanalysis*, and *Happenings*—plus the famous "Notes on 'Camp'."

SUSAN SONTAG author of *The Benefactor*, has published extensively in *The Partisan Review*, *The New York Review of Books*, *Book Week*, *Evergreen Review*, *The Nation*, and others.

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## **The beginning, biography:**

*Conceived in China, the fetus/brainchild of fur traders.  
Born Susan Rosenblatt, in New York City, January 16,  
1933.*

*Became a half-orphan at age six, when her father died.*

*Suffered extreme asthma as a child, and romanticized  
diseases of the lungs – tuberculosis in her favorite novel  
"The Magic Mountain," embodied the tragic ideal of wasting  
illness, hacking coughs and melancholic solitude.*

*In 1945, her mother married Captain Nathan Sontag, who  
told the thirteen year old Susan, "Don't be too smart: you'll  
never get married." To which she replied, laughing "I don't  
want to marry anybody who wouldn't like somebody like  
me."*

*Graduated from North Hollywood high school in the Fall of  
1948. She was almost sixteen and had begun that fall as  
a sophomore.*

*Entered The University of Chicago the following year after  
a brief time at Berkeley. She was seen in the same blue  
jeans, plaid shirt and army jacket every day, and gained  
her Bachelors in less than two years.*

*Married Phillip Rieff, a professor ten years her senior, in  
1949.*

She perceived her early life, moving from New York, to Arizona, to Los Angeles, as a series of displacements – jarring contextual shifts highlighting the transient, intermittent nature of the self. The self was something to be willed into existence; created out of the books she read. Themes of exile, foreignness, Otherness and self-creation are throughout her work. The paradox here, that she acknowledged, is that this notion of self-creation is deeply American. Even as she embraced European culture and a European gaze on American politics, she retained this quintessentially American notion of self-hood.

*Their son David Rieff was born in 1952, and in 1954 she began the Masters program at Harvard, achieved a Masters in Philosophy in 1957, and wore her hair long and glossy, paired with brown suede jackets.*

*In 1957 she was awarded a fellowship to prepare her dissertation on the "metaphysical presuppositions of ethics" at St. Anne's College, Oxford.*

She moved to Paris to study at the Sorbonne in 1958, where she met Alfred Chester, a bald literary monster who wore flaming orange wigs and wrote nasty convoluted prose and dreamed up ingenious money-making schemes to avoid getting a job. After their friendship ended, he wrote to a friend "how dare you say 'your friend S. Sontag'? You rat, she is my enemy, she is everybody's enemy. She is The Enemy." He put her in his unfinished novel "The Foot" and called her Mary Monday. In the novel, Mary Monday has a double, also called Mary Monday. He described her in letters as having a two-track personality – the noble literary figure and the cynical whore. All this rancor may

or may not have something to do with her fame (and his obscurity,) or his own demise into bitter insanity.

*In 1959 she separated from her husband, retrieved her son David, and moved to New York City with two suitcases and seventy dollars.*

She published her first book – a collection of essays – in 1965 and was quickly hailed as the spokesperson for a generation, a leading intellectual light. The book, Against Interpretation, was received as a heralding of the newly blurred boundary between high and low culture. Essays like "Notes on Camp," about the gay sensibility, and "The Imagination of Disaster" on science-fiction films, were hip outlines of popular cultural forms.

She studied the Frankfurt school – Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin et al, reading the emerging form of writing now known as cultural criticism. It's been heavily academicized, but in the sixties it was still blasphemous, and exciting, for an intellectual to write about the movies, pop culture and fashions. But even then, her real interest seemed different than her readers wished it to be. She refers to camp as a sensibility (as distinct from an idea) and in the third paragraph of *Notes on Camp*, she writes, "to name a sensibility, to draw its contours and to recount its history, requires a **deep sympathy modified by revulsion.**"

She goes on to probe at issues of taste for a few more paragraphs, writing that taste governs every free, as opposed to rote, human response. "camp, sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a "lamp"; not a

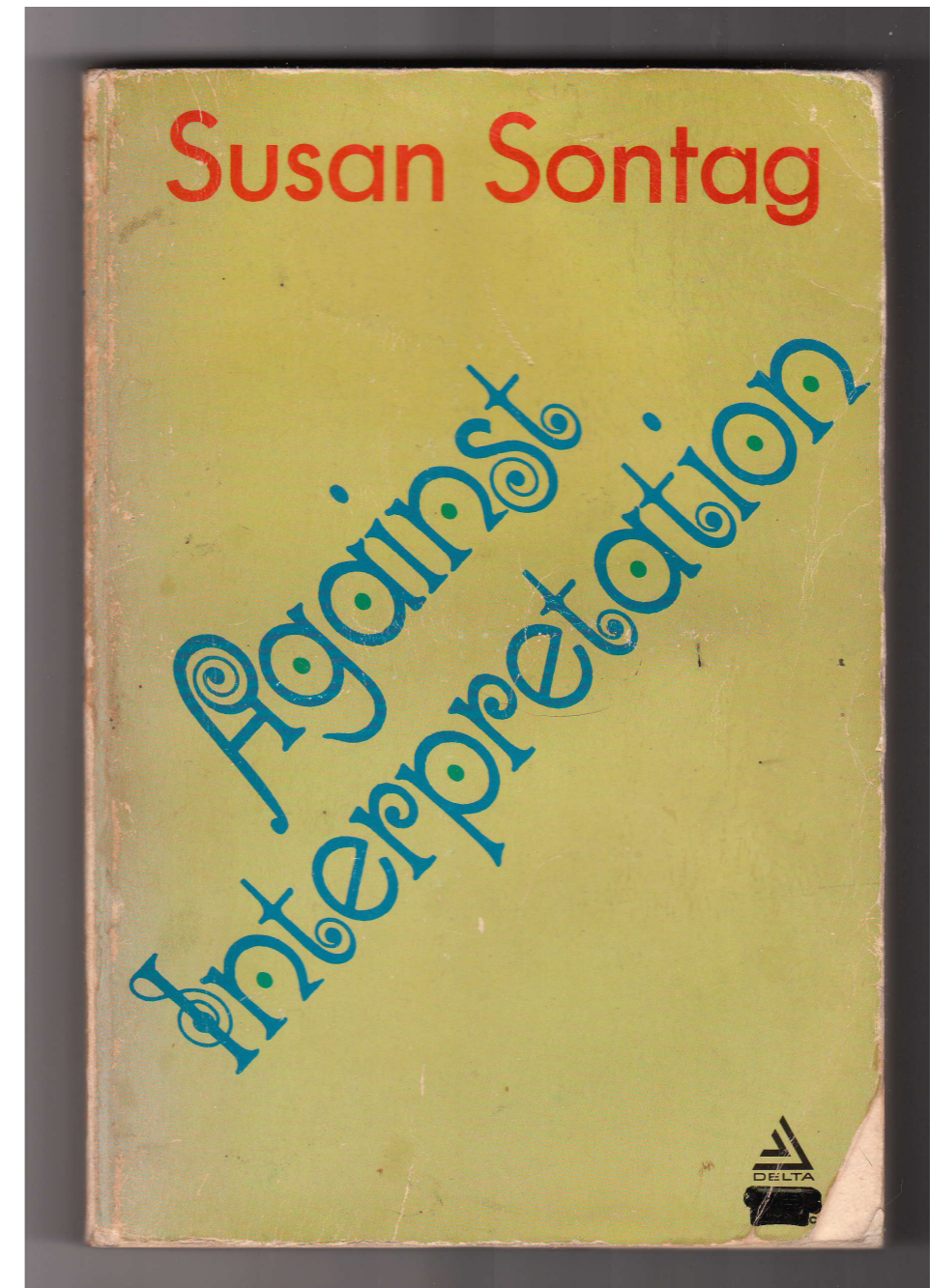
woman but a "woman." To perceive camp in objects and personas is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role." "it is a sensibility that is alive to a double sense in which some things can be taken. But this is not the familiar split-level construction of a literal meaning, on the one hand, and a symbolic meaning on the other. It is the difference, rather, between the thing as meaning something, anything, and the thing as pure artifice... behind the "straight" public sense in which something can be taken, one has found a private zany experience of the thing."

I think she had two main intentions in writing this essay, ONE, the outline of a sensibility, a sensitive description, not so much of what the people are into these days, but, through the particulars of this taste, to talk about taste in the general sense. The homosexual affinity for camp parallels, for Sontag, that of Jews for liberalism; the two pioneering sensibilities of modernity are Jewish moral seriousness and homosexual aestheticism and irony. This isn't flippancy; she was a deeply conflicted homosexual Jew.

The second purpose is to delineate, through the particulars of camp taste, what a sensibility is. "a sensibility is almost, but not quite, ineffable. Any sensibility which can be crammed into the mold of a *system*, or handled with the rough tools of proof, is no longer a sensibility at all. It has hardened into an idea.

THINKING AGAINST ONESELF P78 styles of radical will

System, proof, idea and against these words, sensibility. This is Sontag's implicit manifesto. After the collapse of

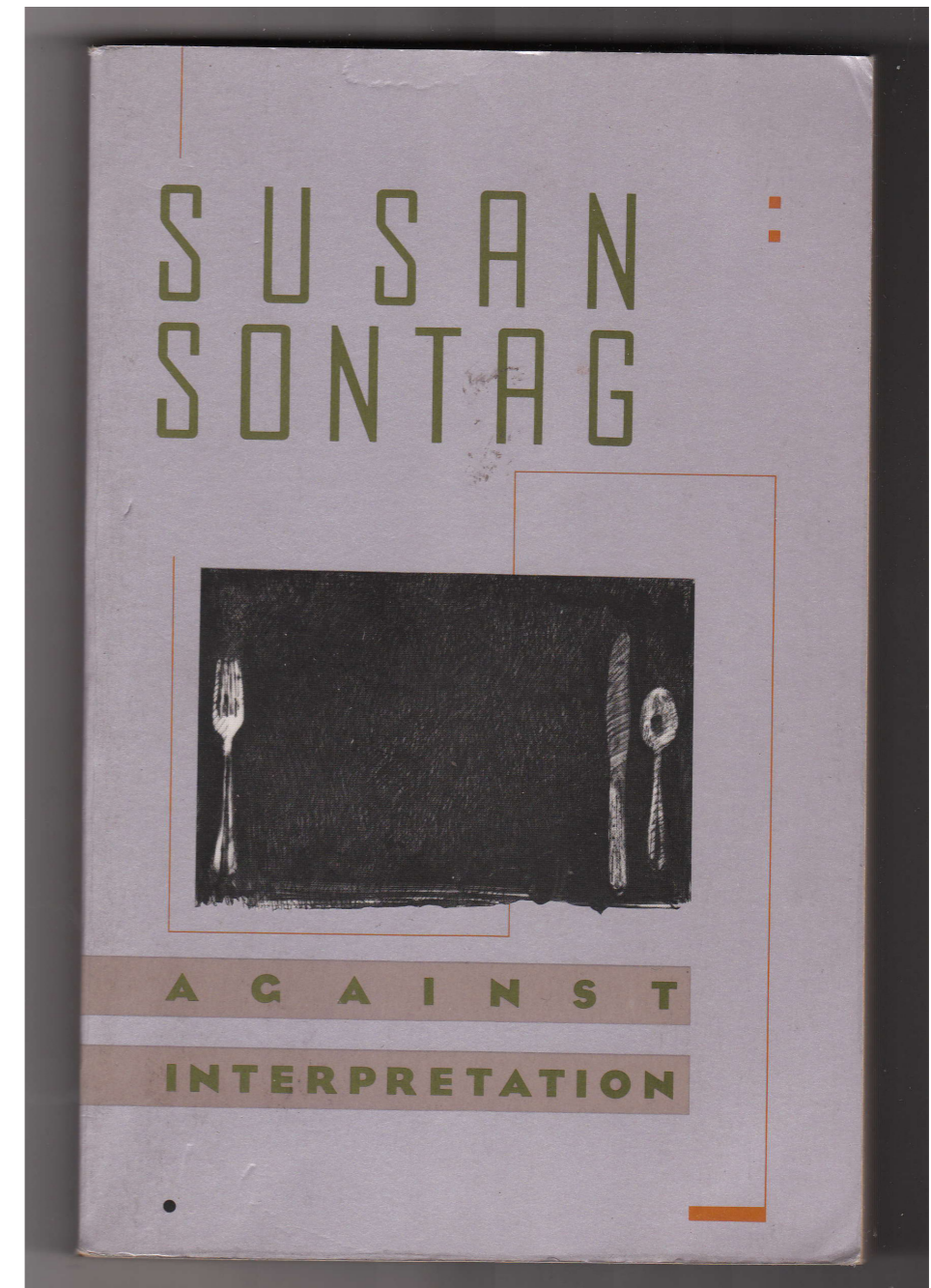


philosophical system building came the rise of ideologies, like Comte, Marx, Freud, and anthropology. These are the hardened ideas – ideologies. Sontag veered, from this fork in the philosophical genealogy, toward the other tradition – that of personal, aphoristic, lyrical, anti-systematic philosophizing. Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein.

Its forms are mutilated discourse, fragments, notes, jottings, remembrances, or (discourse that has risked metamorphosis into other forms – the parable, the poem, the philosophical tale, the critical exegesis.) what she would eventually shorthand into **Literature: that we are each alone in the world, and cannot risk generalizing our experience beyond the limits of skin – which leaves fissures and discontinuities in our understanding of life.** But we cannot valorize this loneliness, we can only trace its contours and pass on what we have learned to the next lonely person.

The experience of reading is like a blood transfusion, or making love. To paraphrase George Michael, reading is best when its *one on one*. This intimate apprenticeship must inevitably be, in modernity, between broken individuals, but individuals all the same, not lecture halls, not concert arenas, not political rallies.

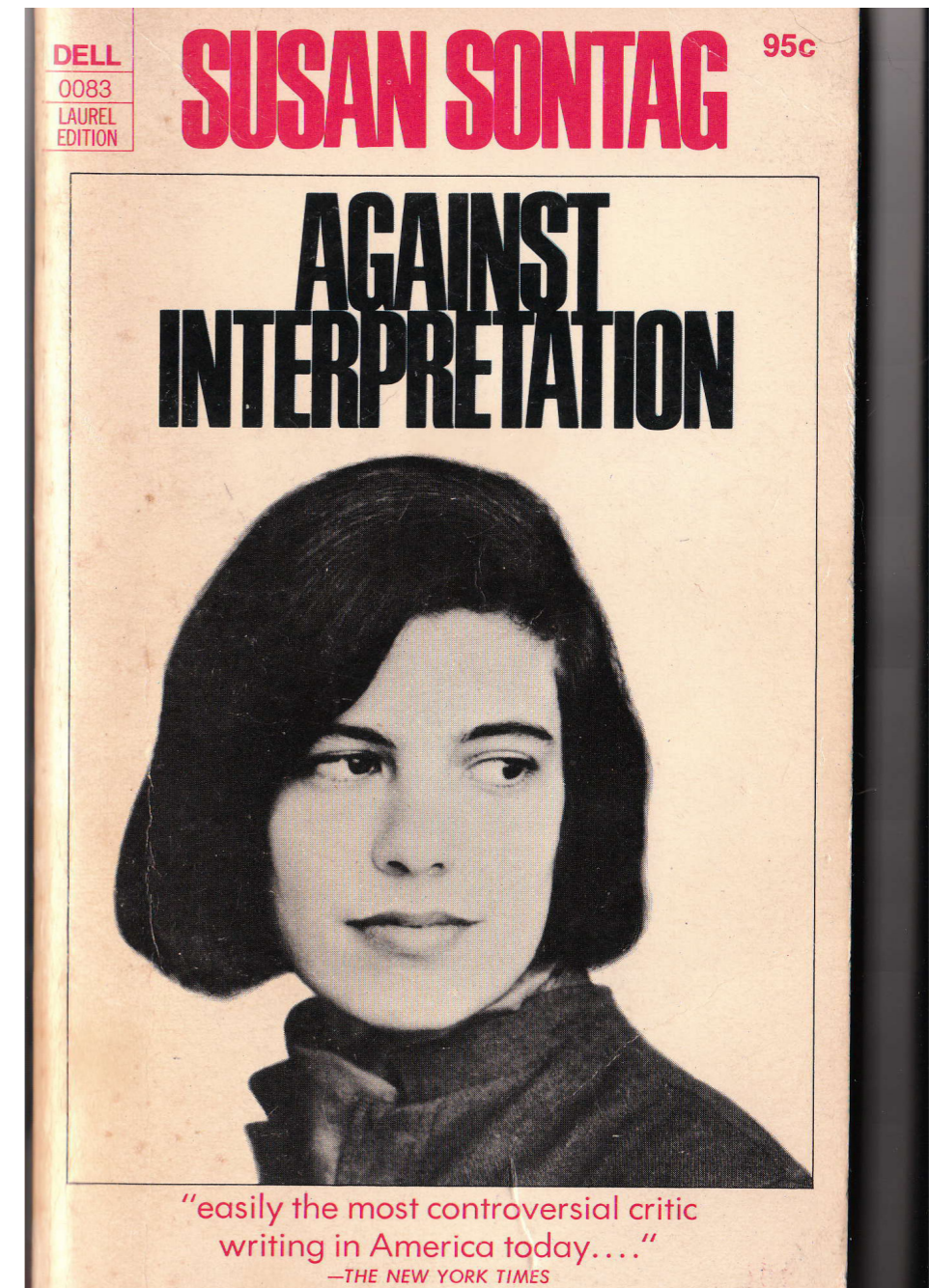
But again, what is it that is passed on in this intimacy? What is inherited, if not ideas, and not self-expression? A sensibility. And how can one define this thing which is by nature ineffable, anti-systematic? One can describe the typical language that clings to a particular sensibility (in the case of camp, it is “that is so bad its good”) one can point out its reason for flourishing now, and not before:



because camp taste has replaced the dandy, a nineteenth century aesthete. Camp taste is a mode of appreciation, not judgment, she avers. When is one drawn to camp? When one realizes that sincerity is not enough. Sincerity can be simple philistinism (always her cruelest accusation) intellectual narrowness.

The other aspect of Sontag's interest in camp - overlooked by the majority of her disappointed fans, is to be found in the quote **"behind the 'straight' public sense in which something can be taken, one has found a private zany experience of a thing."** Or later, "Detachment is the prerogative of an elite; and as the dandy is the 19<sup>th</sup> century's surrogate for the aristocrat in matters of culture, so camp is the modern dandyism. Camp is the answer to the problem: how to be a dandy in the age of mass culture." I find the source of her ambivalence here - her "deep sympathy modified by revulsion." "The dandy seeks rare sensations, undefiled by mass appreciation." Because feeling the same thing everyone feels makes the feeling false, you develop an ironical relationship to the feeling - you drag it from your breast and mock it mercilessly for it made you feel common - it alienated you from yourself (but identified you with the mass). Of course, the ethicist in Sontag made her struggle with this revulsion - and sometimes she chose a false truce, whereby her politics and her aesthetics peeled apart, with essays on politics even occupying a different section of the book. Even her voice in the political writing is different. She becomes strident where the situation calls for sensitivity, and where, in her literary work, she maintained a moody, elegiac tone.

This split (between politics and aesthetics) was wonderfully



inconsistent. Her essay, "Trip to Hanoi" is interesting precisely because she is plainly, openly, grappling with her ambivalence. The impetus is an invited visit to North Vietnam in April of 1968, during the war. She writes that she is passionately opposed to the American aggression in Vietnam, but that she had "the pretty firm idea that I wouldn't write about the trip upon my return. Being neither a journalist nor a political activist (though a veteran signer of petitions and anti-war demonstrator) nor an Asian specialist, but rather a stubbornly unspecialized writer who has so far been largely unable to incorporate into either novels or essays my evolving radical political convictions and sense of moral dilemma at being a citizen of the American empire..." perhaps the difficulty started... "with the lack of a purpose that really justified in my own mind my being invited to North Vietnam..." The Vietnamese are perfect hosts. Too perfect, as she recounts, she is babied and protected, she has no stimulating conversations, she sees no chinks in the armor of appropriateness, no hidey holes or secret places to discover or investigate, no mysteries to unravel, no obstinate psychologies to prod. She is bored to tears, and longs for her sophisticated, cosmopolitan, capitalist American empire. She is bewildered and confused and says so plainly in the essay. "How odd to feel estranged from Vietnam here, when Vietnam has been present in my thoughts every day in America." "Maybe I'm only fit to share a people's revolutionary aspirations at a comfortable distance from them and their struggle – one more volunteer in the armchair army of bourgeois intellectuals with radical sympathies in the head."

And what do those bourgeois intellectuals do best? "Thus talk often testifies to the poverty or inhibition of our

feelings; it flourishes as a substitute for more organic connections between people. (when people really love, or are genuinely in touch with themselves, they tend to shut up.) But Vietnam is a culture in which people have not got the final devastating point about talking, have not gauged the subtle, ambivalent resources of language – because they don't experience as we do the isolation of a 'private self.' Talk is still a rather plain instrumentality for them, a less important means of being connected with their environment than direct feeling, love. The absence of the sharp distinction between public and private selves also allows the Vietnamese a relation to their country that must seem exotic to us. It is open to the Vietnamese to love their country passionately, every inch of it."

Contrast with the Parisian student revolution in May 1968 occurring while Sontag was in Vietnam, of which she wrote,

"Indeed, revolution in the Western capitalist countries seems to be an activity expressly designed never to succeed. For many people, it is an asocial activity, a form of action designed for the assertion of individuality against the body politic. It is the ritual activity of outsiders, rather than of people united by a passionate bond to their country."

This idealism is matched by an elitism born of realism in the essay *Fascinating Fascism*, on the films of Leni Riefenstahl, Hitler's propagandist. It is frequently cited as Sontag's big recanting moment, where she undermines her previous argument, from "On Style" 1965 for the importance of form over content –

"In art, 'content' is, as it were, the pretext, the goal, the lure which engages consciousness in essentially formal processes of transformation. This is how we can, in good conscience, cherish works of art which, considered in terms of 'content' are morally objectionable to us...to call Leni Riefenstahl's *The Triumph of the Will* and *The Olympiad* masterpieces is not to gloss over Nazi propaganda with aesthetic lenience. The Nazi propaganda is there. But something else is there too, which we reject at our loss."

By 1974, in *Fascinating Fascism* "Art which evokes the themes of fascist aesthetic is popular now, and for most people it is probably no more than a variant of camp. Fascism may be merely fashionable, and perhaps fashion with its irrepressible promiscuity of taste will save us. But the judgments of taste themselves seem less innocent. Art that seemed eminently worth defending ten years ago, as a minority or adversary taste, no longer seems defensible today, because the ethical and cultural issues it raises have become serious, even dangerous, in a way they were not then. The hard truth is that what may be acceptable in elite culture may not be acceptable in mass culture, that tastes which pose only innocuous ethical issues as the property of a minority become corrupting when they become more established. Taste is context, and the context has changed."

The hard truths about elite vs mass culture are comparable to the irreconcilability of the public and private selves. In the essay on Michel Leiris' *Manhood*, she compares Leiris, a European, to Norman Mailer, an American – whereas Mailer shows us how his private travails and weaknesses produce the strength of his public work – and wants to

engage the reader in his process of transformation, Leiris sees no continuity between his public, distinguished self, and his private weaknesses.

\*\*Paglia on elitism? And people wonder why she didn't have a television.



## On Biography

About Sartre's Saint Genet, she wrote "One should perhaps be grateful that Sartre stops after six hundred and twenty-five pages. The indefatigable act of literary and philosophical disembowelment... could just as well have gone on for a thousand pages... What made the book grow and grow is that Sartre, the philosopher, could not help (however reverentially) upstaging Genet, the poet."

"The name 'Genet', repeated thousands of times throughout the book never seems to be the name of a real person."

Of course he's not a real person. It's an endless treadmill, hunting a ghost. But what makes that hunt worthwhile is the elusiveness of the prey. Reading Sontag can often be a comfort to me – a melancholy companion, but now, as I am preparing to share her with/spite her for/betray her to/eviscerate her with others, I bite my nails and overeat. I am not equal to the task of interpreting the woman who wrote Against Interpretation. Who wrote "To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world – in order to set up a shadow world of meanings." A prodigy with a photographic memory, an icon of the twentieth century, she left five volumes of essays, one book of short stories, and four novels as well as various unanthologized essays, lectures and introductions, one play, some films and many notebooks which I hear will be published by 2010.

I know that she was a consummate fan; she admitted that she found writing very difficult and frequently prolonged the period of reading in order to avoid writing. She lived for a year in 1972 in a tiny room in Paris with no books,

where, as she wrote "I try better to hear my own voice and discover what I really think and really feel."

On Elias Canetti, in *Mind as Passion* 1980 "And by the magnanimity of his homage (to Hermann Broch,) Canetti adds one more element to this portrait of the writer as his age's noble adversary: the writer as noble admirer... his desire for strong, even overpowering models... in order to defend the value for a serious writer of being, at least for a while, in thrall to another's authority: the essay on [Karl] Kraus is really about the ethics of admiration... he is preoccupied with being someone *he* can admire."



## **Courtesy**

Remembered by all who knew the young Sontag as placid, docile and "handsome, not pretty," her mother called her "goody two-shoes."

Friedrich Nietzsche, one of her progenitors, was described as gentle and extremely polite, especially toward people he did not like.

In 1962, in a notebook, she wrote, "Premature pliability, agreeableness; so that the underlying stubbornness is never touched, accounts for 80% of my notorious flirtatiousness, seductiveness."

In 1966, "Self-expression is the limiting idea, limiting if it's central. (Art as self-expression is very limiting.) From self-expression one can never arrive at an authentic, a genuine, not merely expedient justification for courtesy... But if you start with courtesy, you can accommodate most of what people attribute to self-expression (through idea of courtesy to oneself).

In 1978, on Walter Benjamin, "Dissimulation, secretiveness appear a necessity to the melancholic. He has complex, often veiled relations with others. These feelings of superiority, of inadequacy, of baffled feeling, of not being able to get what one wants, or even name it properly (or consistently) to oneself – these can be, it is felt they ought to be, masked by friendliness, or the most scrupulous manipulation... Nor is one surprised to learn that this fastidious, intransigent, fiercely serious man could also flatter people he probably did not think his equals, that he could let himself be

"baited" (his own word) and condescended to by Brecht on his visits to Denmark. This prince of the intellectual life could also be a courtier."

## **Appetite**

In a notebook, from July 27, 1964, "my ostentatious appetite – real need – to eat exotic and "disgusting" foods = a need to state my denial of squeamishness. A counter-statement." In "Debriefing" she writes about the hundred year old egg, a Chinese delicacy, which is actually a two-year old duck egg. Crack it open and eat the green and translucent black cheese. Her friends are repelled, but she eats them with gusto.

November 17, 1964 "The intellectual ecstasy I have had access to since early childhood. But ecstasy is ecstasy. Intellectual 'wanting' like sexual wanting."

November 24, 1965 "I come each night around 2 or 3. The New York Times is my lover."

Pornography uses a small, crude vocabulary of feeling, all related to the prospects of action: feeling one would like to act (lust); feeling one would not like to act (shame, fear, aversion). There are no gratuitous or non-functioning feelings; no musings which are irrelevant to the business at hand.

"Man, the sick animal, bears within him an appetite which can drive him mad. Such is the understanding of sexuality – as something beyond good and evil, beyond love, beyond sanity; as a resource for ordeal and for breaking through the limits of consciousness – that informs the French literary canon (The Marquis de Sade, Georges Bataille, Pauline Reage etc)"

"Only in the absence of directly stated emotions can the reader of pornography find room for his own responses." Thus "pornography is mainly populated by creatures like Sade's Justine, endowed with neither will nor intelligence nor even, apparently, memory. Justine lives in a perpetual state of astonishment, never learning anything from the strikingly repetitious violations of her innocence... Justine is like (Voltaire's) Candide, a cipher, a blank, an eternal naïf incapable of learning anything from his atrocious ordeals."

This is the model for pornography, but in her defense of The Story of O as literature, not porn, she describes O's journey "whatever the cost in pain and fear, she is grateful for the opportunity to be initiated into a mystery. That mystery is the loss of the self. O learns, she suffers, she changes. Step by step she becomes more what she is, a process identical with the emptying out of herself... the highest good is transcendence of the self... a kind of ascent through degradation."

Reading, Fucking, Eating. Where does gobbling become grieving and emptiness, the self is devouring in its nascence.

I wonder whether she was ever really able to conceive of herself as a writer, the struggle is so deeply concerned with the pronouns, the "*he*" that is the artist or writer, and the "*I*" that is hungry for emptiness. She has been accused of a father longing, because of her rapt admiration for a host of male authors (as if all female writers didn't contend with this,) but now I am indulging in the kind of interpretation she despised – the simplistic reduction of art to meaning,

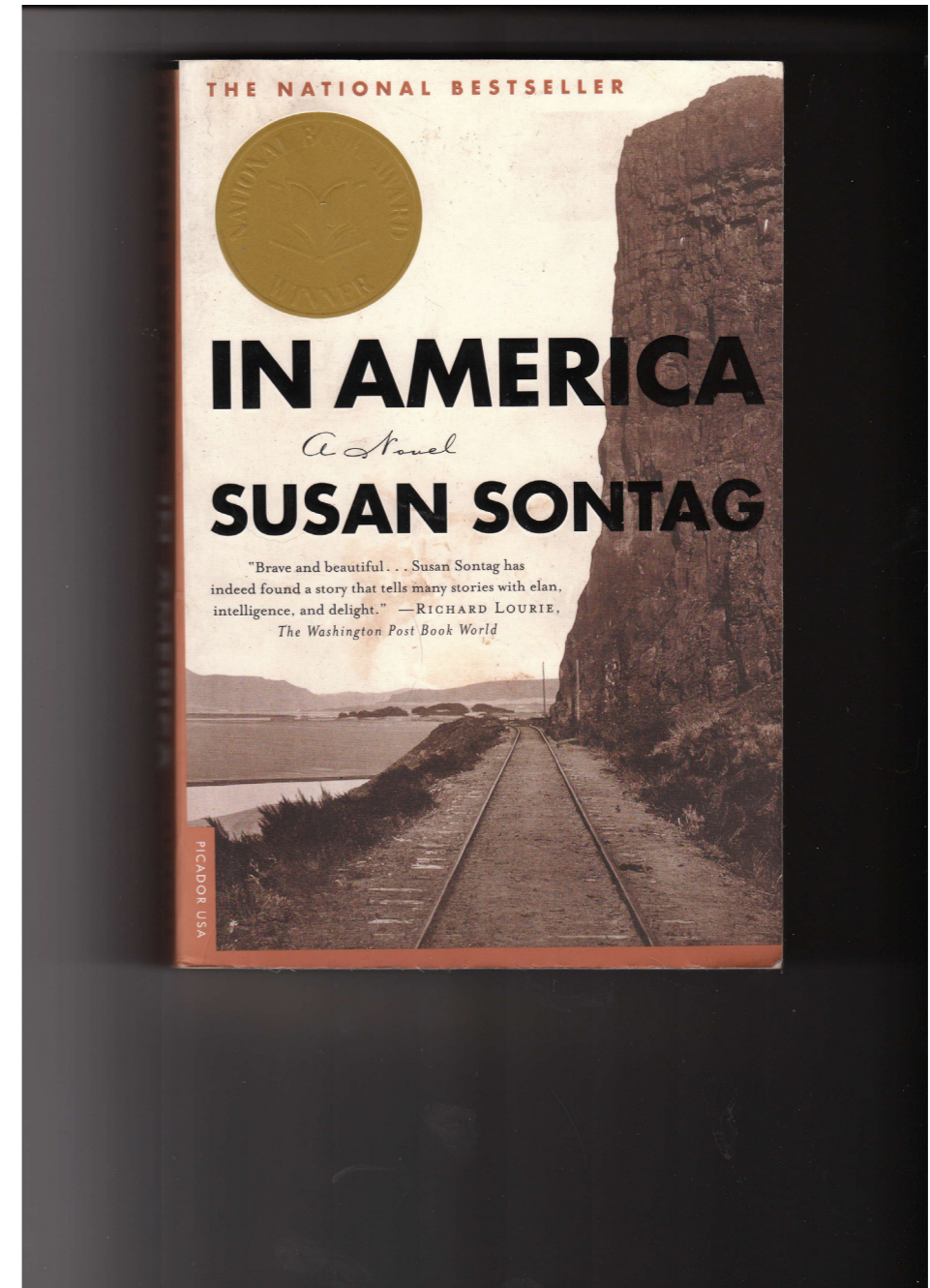
to degraded, misunderstood psychological terms.

And of course she was always aware of these interpretations – moving into them even as she pulled away. Because of course the *Story of O* is about the paradoxically full emptiness – the O being a cartoon of the sex of a woman and also standing for nothing.

All the sexual transgression in the Marquis de Sade leads to death, but Sade killed his characters only occasionally, and even then, the deaths seem unreal, the formal repercussions of his denial of death, “since he could not or would not arrive at his ending, Sade stalled. He multiplied and thickened his narrative, tediously reduplicated orgiastic permutations and combinations.” As with Sartre on Genet, Sontag equates formal repetition with a desperation, failure, denial, falseness.

But she revelled in repetition as well; the repetition of a vampire, who feeds on the vitality of others, who must feed to live. As Robert Boyers wrote of her in Harper’s this February, she was “a writer who wished to identify completely with the prejudices, the misgivings, the intellectual intensity of those she admired, and who appropriated the most bracing and difficult ideas with the hunger of someone who needed them to breathe.”

P44-45 pornographic imagination STYLES  
OF RADICAL WILL



## A Definition of Art

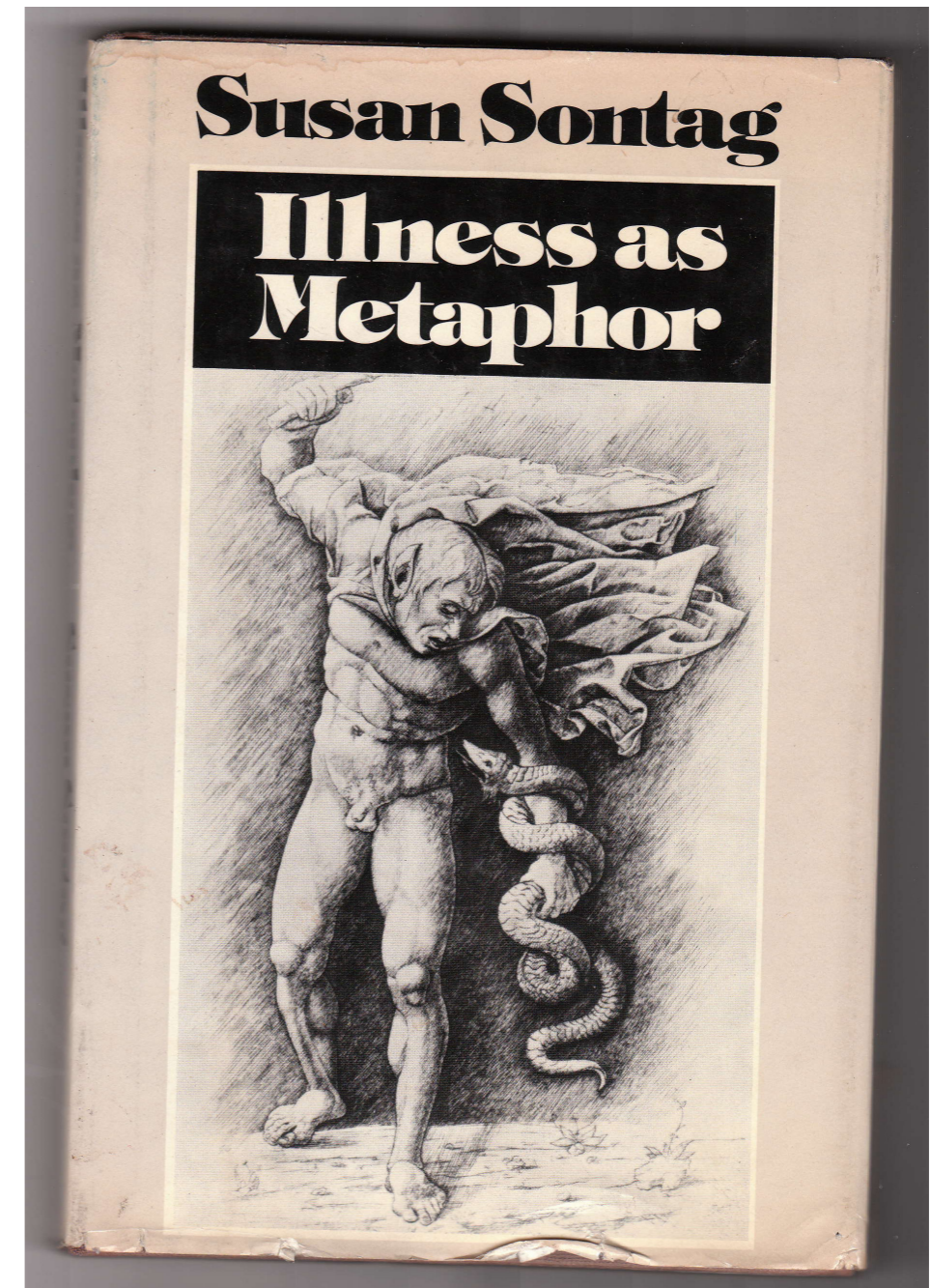
Art is a form of consciousness. Within the last century, art has come to be the nearest thing to a sacramental human activity acknowledged by secular society. The artist goes to the frontiers of consciousness (which is often dangerous to the artist as a person, as a social being) and then makes trophies of his experience that fascinate and enthrall, not merely (as in the past) edify and entertain. He seeks to make his work repulsive, obscure, inaccessible. But his authority rests on the audience's sense of the outrages he commits upon himself.

*I am reading constantly.* Beginning an essay, losing the point, starting over, re-reading, reading something she read, reading someone who wrote about her, reading something so different from her so I might see how they are *not* her. Making myself drown a little more each day – the research is never finished. I never have enough quotes, biographical anecdotes, supporting arguments. I beseech Dana to help me, to figure out a form to put it all into. I say its like going strawberry picking without taking a bucket, so I stuff my face with strawberries until juice is dripping down my shirt, stuck to my cheeks, churning in my stomach. Till the brink of diarrhea. And then begin to write. To begin with a form is unethical. It curtails discovery, experience, transformation. Form evolves out of content. The content is the story of learning to read by reading someone who was also reading others who read. My apprenticeship to a master apprentice. Ourobouros.



## Disburdenment

On her own reasons for writing essays, she writes, "For me, the essays have done their work. I see the world differently, with fresher eyes; my conception of my task as a novelist is drastically changed...Writing criticism has proved to be an act of intellectual disburdenment as much as of intellectual self-expression." Disburdenment of the *anxiety of influence*, but she makes Harold Bloom's analysis so physical. One must engorge and then disburden.



## On the Autobiography of Another

She chose the men she wrote about as intellectual foils. Her sense of extreme isolation rivals theirs. She could not come into contact with; *recognize*, herself except through these encounters with Leiris, Lukacz, Benjamin, Canetti, Cioran, Camus, Sartre, Barthes etc.

"Why do we read a writer's journal...Here we read the writer in the first person; we encounter the ego behind the masks of ego in an author's works... for the modern consciousness, the artist (replacing the saint) is the exemplary sufferer. As a man he suffers, as a writer, he transforms his sufferings into art."

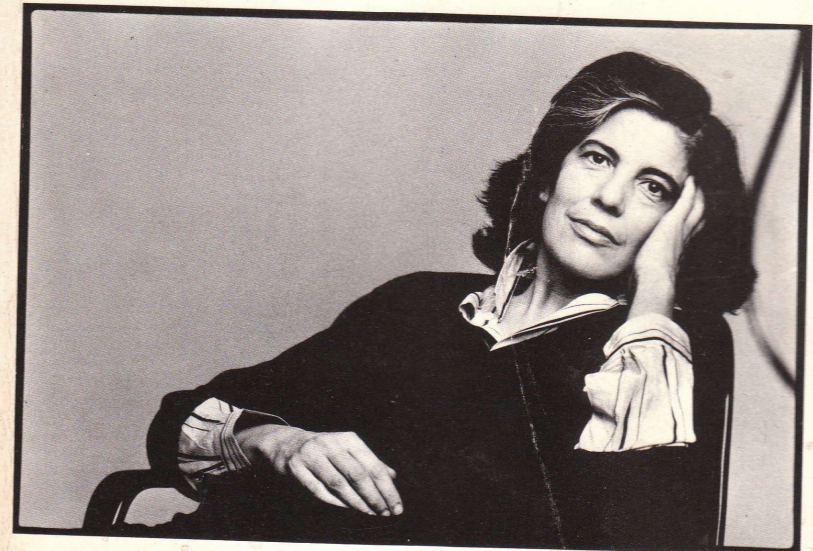
"...to be a writer, a man of letters, is not enough. It is boring, pallid. It lacks danger. Michel Leiris must feel, as he writes, the equivalent of the bullfighter's knowledge that he risks being gored. Only then is writing worthwhile. But how? ...Leiris loathes his physical cowardice and ineptness. Yet far from wishing to exonerate himself for his ugly failings, what he seems to wish is to convince himself that this unsatisfactory body – and this unseemly character – really exist. Haunted by a sense of the unreality of the world, and ultimately of himself, Leiris searches for a strong, unequivocal feeling... What is real is defined as that which involves the risk of death."

I am seventeen years old, sneaking into the house long past midnight, against the rules. Jeff, the black dachshund my mother adopted the year before, will bark when I arrive and my mother will awaken, thus I am expected to be home before midnight or not at all. My mother refuses

to be roused in the middle of the night as she finds falling back to sleep terribly difficult. Her mind is too active; memories torture her nights. Sleep, once arrived at, is too precious to be sacrificed to her angst-ridden adolescent daughter's new social life. On this particular evening I choose to come home, brave her potential wrath and slide the heavy front door open on its squeaky hinges. Each foot is laid carefully on the ground, rolled from the side to avoid the loud slap a shoe can make on the hardwood floor. I wrap my fingers around the inside handle and move with the door, silent as a mime, to its swish-click closure, and turn to see my crouching mother on the carpeted stairs, in baggy satin underwear with a mug in her hand and a book open on her lap. She can't sleep. Not my fault. She's been awake for hours, sick and sniffing, drinking rum from the rarely touched liquor cabinet, and reading The Volcano Lover, by Susan Sontag. Anticipating rage, I instead got a conspiratorial drunken rhapsodic on Sontag's prose. I think this is the first time I heard of her, so for me, her image is forever wedded to that of my drunken mother in the stairwell. Thirteen years later, my mother lay in her bed in Italy, talking to me in thick drowsy tones about her lifelong feeling of loneliness – deep-seated isolation even in the midst of a full social life – and I think of Sontag.

S U S A N

SONTAG



THE  
ELEGIAC  
MODERNIST

S O H N Y A

SAYRE

## Paglia

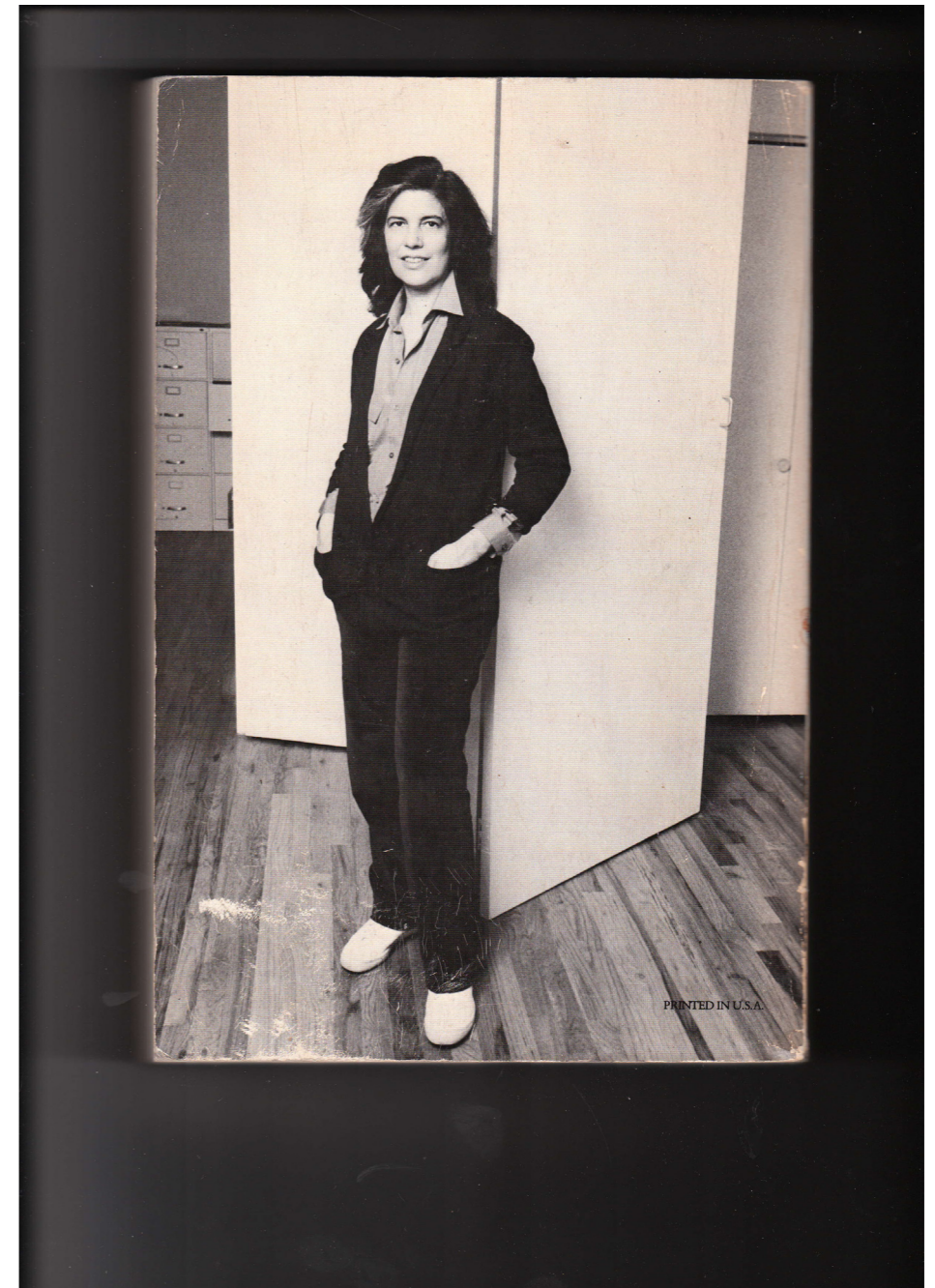
Camille Paglia disses her up and down, right and left, like those cartoons where a character grabs the arms of their opponent and flings them around like a sack of potatoes, whomp whamp whomp! Paglia wrote, "I am the contender challenging the heavyweight, I am the avenger. I was an early admirer and now I'm her worst nightmare." She slings mud at The Volcano Lover, saying it is pedestrian, lacks an accurate understanding of history (it is a historical novel) and calling Sontag the ultimate symbol of bourgeois taste.

That's a serious insult, and part of me agrees with Paglia. I have read so much in the past two months about her New York *coterie*, how no one was willing to challenge her publicly, how protected she was by everyone - her life-long publishers Farrar Straus and Giroux, her son, her friends. She has been called an intellectual duchess, a mandarin, cloistered, for being so out of touch with the realities of American culture. In a 1988 profile in Time magazine, she denied that she had ever been that interested in pop, ("it isn't as if I wrote an essay on the Supremes") and boasted that she did not even own a television set.

The source of Paglia's wrath is disappointment. She wanted more from her hero. She wanted her to be the kind of thinker Paglia herself became - tough, socially engaged, polemical, and boisterously popular. Susan Sontag appeared to be that particular kind of powerful woman - who seems motivated by strong inner forces - who seems unmoved by the normal anxieties of the feminine, which is rare enough that people (women and gay men) invest her with

their dreams. She becomes a vessel, and thereafter, every move she makes is a disappointment, because she has not properly shouldered the burden of their expectations.

Why do we begin to admire someone? Maybe it was once because she had brown hair like mine; because she was Jewish; because she was a woman. I read that she was like an Amazon, or Athena. Not only was she very tall, she had large hips, broad shoulders, a powerful face. For as long as I can remember, my highest ambition has been to be large. Large of mind, of spirit, yes, but also tall, big, like Gulliver, so that the judgments and cruelty of others would fall like pinpricks, so that I would have no need for fear, no possibility of curling up and hiding. So that I could lie, like the lion, king of the jungle, peacefully in the sun.



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### **Some Words**

Paroxysms  
Shuddering with terror  
Fastidious  
Unsullied  
Bleakness  
Religious fanatic  
Obsessional  
Hyperbole  
Grotesque  
Blasphemous  
Powerlessness  
Testimony  
Brevity  
Impatience  
Roughness  
Lacerating  
Raging contradictions  
Distracted  
Exalted  
Unregenerate  
Insatiability



## The "I"

December 31, 1958 Paris "Why is writing important? Mainly out of egotism I suppose. Because I want to be that persona, a writer, and not because there is something I must say. Yet why not that too? With a little ego-building – such as the *fait accompli* this journal provides – I shall win through to the confidence that I (I) have something to say, that should be said. My "I" is puny, cautious, too sane. Good writers are roaring egotists, even to the point of fatuity. Sane men, critics, correct them, but their sanity is parasitic on the creative fatuity of genius."

"the real subject is never the violent happening (in Pavese's work) but the cautious subjectivity of the narrator."

"We are not satisfied. It is the author naked which the modern audience demands, as ages of religious faith demanded a human sacrifice."

I, etcetera is the title of her book of short stories written in the first person; an unnamed, generalized "I" –Made multiple, generic, doubled; the hypothetical "I" voice of memoirs, confessionals, depraved housewives, the leaders of secret anti-governmental organizations, historical figures. Always the voice of "one who writes," but acknowledging the expansion of that position beyond the confines of intellectual activities, or rather, intellectualizing the uncharted responses. In "The Dummy" "I" is an average American man with a family who rejects suicide as an option for escape, and chooses instead to create a clone of himself, and train this creature to take his place in the home, at work etc. In "Project for a Trip to China," the "I"

is a constellation of yearnings around the exotic, the Other, which is at the center of her knowledge of self. China is both the place where she was conceived, and where her father died. Travel and tourism are explored as methods of deciphering the self, disburdening the self, and inventing the self.

### **Thinking Against Oneself**

"The novels are about crises of conscience... and the refusal to allow crises of conscience."



## On Time and Death

Her son, David Rieff, writes in his introduction to *At The Same Time*, her post-humous book of essays, "On her seventieth birthday (*in 2003*,) she told me that what she most yearned for was time, time to do the work that essay writing had distracted her from so often and so lengthily. And as she grew sicker, she spoke with leaden sadness of time wasted."

Time wasted on essay writing invites the comparison to housekeeping – a necessary distraction from the real work for many women creators. Though she was never a housewife, in some ways Sontag used essay writing to keep house – to kick out the cobwebs, take inventory, make itemized lists of recent passions, discard outworn ideas. I read that while at the University of Chicago she expressed disgust to another female student because the girl was jotting grocery lists in the margins of her Hegel lecture notes.

In *Mind as Passion*, published in 1980, she writes of Elias Canetti's struggle with death:

"To think about history is to think about the dead; and to be incessantly reminded that one is mortal. Canetti's thought is conservative in the most literal sense. It – he – does not want to die. "I want to feel everything in me before I think it," Canetti wrote in 1943, and for this, he says, he needs a long life. To die prematurely means not having fully engorged himself and, therefore, not having used his mind as he could. Recurrent images of needing to feel everything inside himself, of unifying everything

in one head, illustrate Canetti's attempts through magical thinking and moral clamorousness to "refute" death. Canetti offers to strike a bargain with death. 'a century? A paltry hundred years? Is that too much for an earnest intention!'

But Sontag wants more; she goes on to cite Karel Capek's play from 1922 *The Makropulos Affair*,

"What can a man do during his sixty years of life? What enjoyment has he? What can he learn? You don't live to get the fruit of a tree you have planted; you'll never learn all the things that mankind has discovered before you; you won't complete your work or leave your example behind you; you'll die without having even lived. A life of three hundred years on the other hand would allow fifty years to be a child and a pupil; fifty years to get to know the world and see all that exists in it; one hundred years to work for the benefit of all; and then, when he has achieved all human experience, another hundred years to live in wisdom, to rule, to teach, and to set an example. Oh, how valuable human life would be if it lasted three hundred years."

"Because the mind is so real to him... and because the body is so unreal he perceives nothing dismaying about extreme longevity... Youth has no part in Canetti's fantasy of immortality. It is pure longevity, the longevity of the mind... Canetti thought "the brevity of life makes us bad."

Emilia Makropulos differs "You cannot go on loving for three hundred years. And you cannot go on hoping, creating, gazing at things for three hundred years. You can't stand

it. Everything becomes boring. It's boring to be good and boring to be bad."

Only the recognition of one's imminent death resuscitates interest in the world,

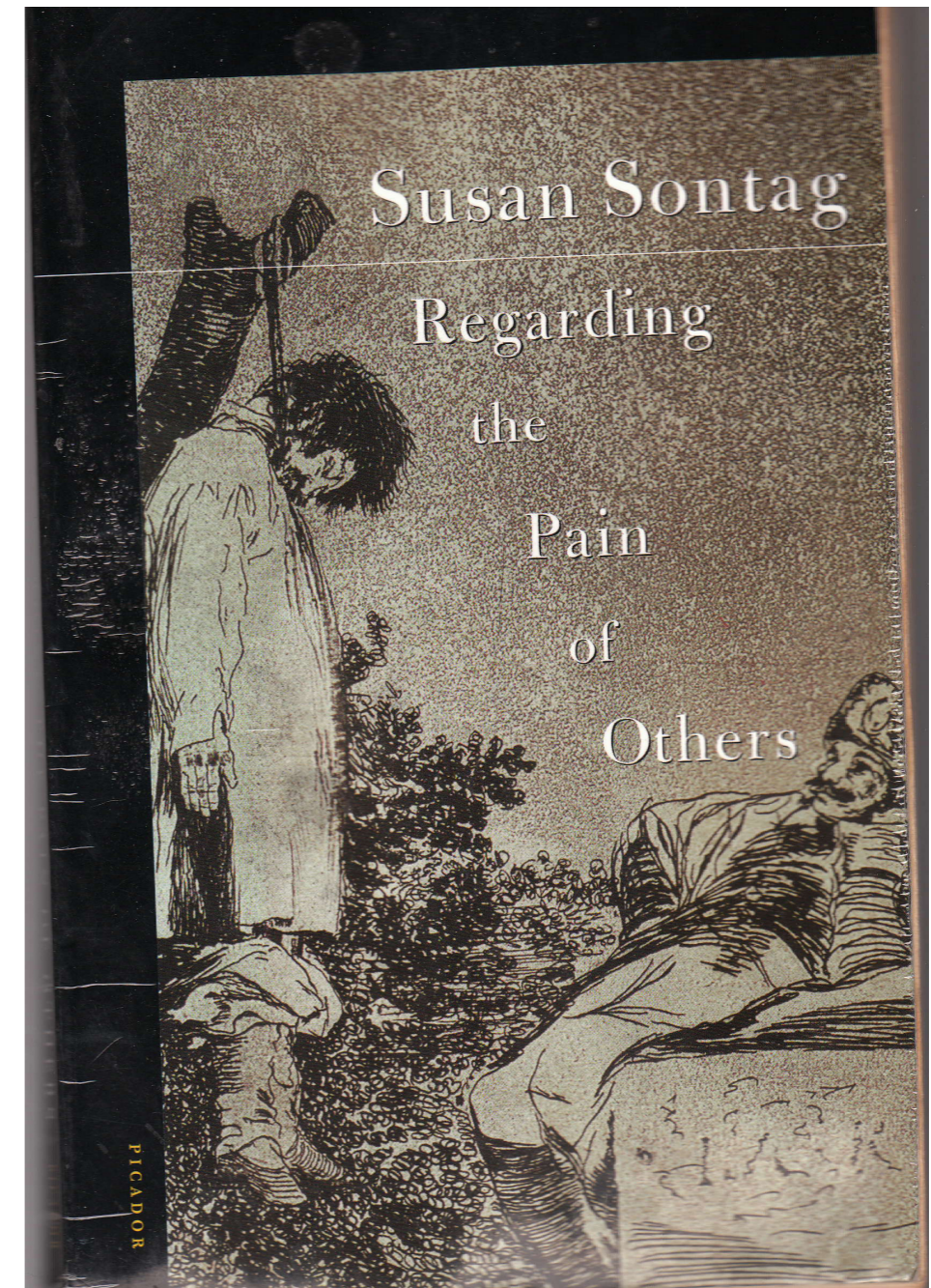
"But this plausible doom is just what Canetti cannot admit. He is unperturbed by the possibility of the flagging of appetite, the satiation of desire, the devaluation of passion. Canetti gives no thought to the decomposition of the feelings any more than of the body, only to the persistence of the mind. Rarely has anyone been so at home in the mind, with so little ambivalence."

## On Admiring Others

"Most people seem to think now that writing is just a form of self-expression. As we are no longer supposed to be capable of authentically altruistic feelings, we are not supposed to be capable of writing about anyone but ourselves. But that's not true. William Trevor speaks of the boldness of the non-autobiographical imagination. "Why wouldn't you write to escape yourself as much as you might write to express yourself? It's far more interesting to write about others."

"Here is the great difference between reading and writing. Reading is a vocation, a skill at which, with practice, you are bound to become more expert. What you accumulate as a writer is mostly uncertainties and anxieties."

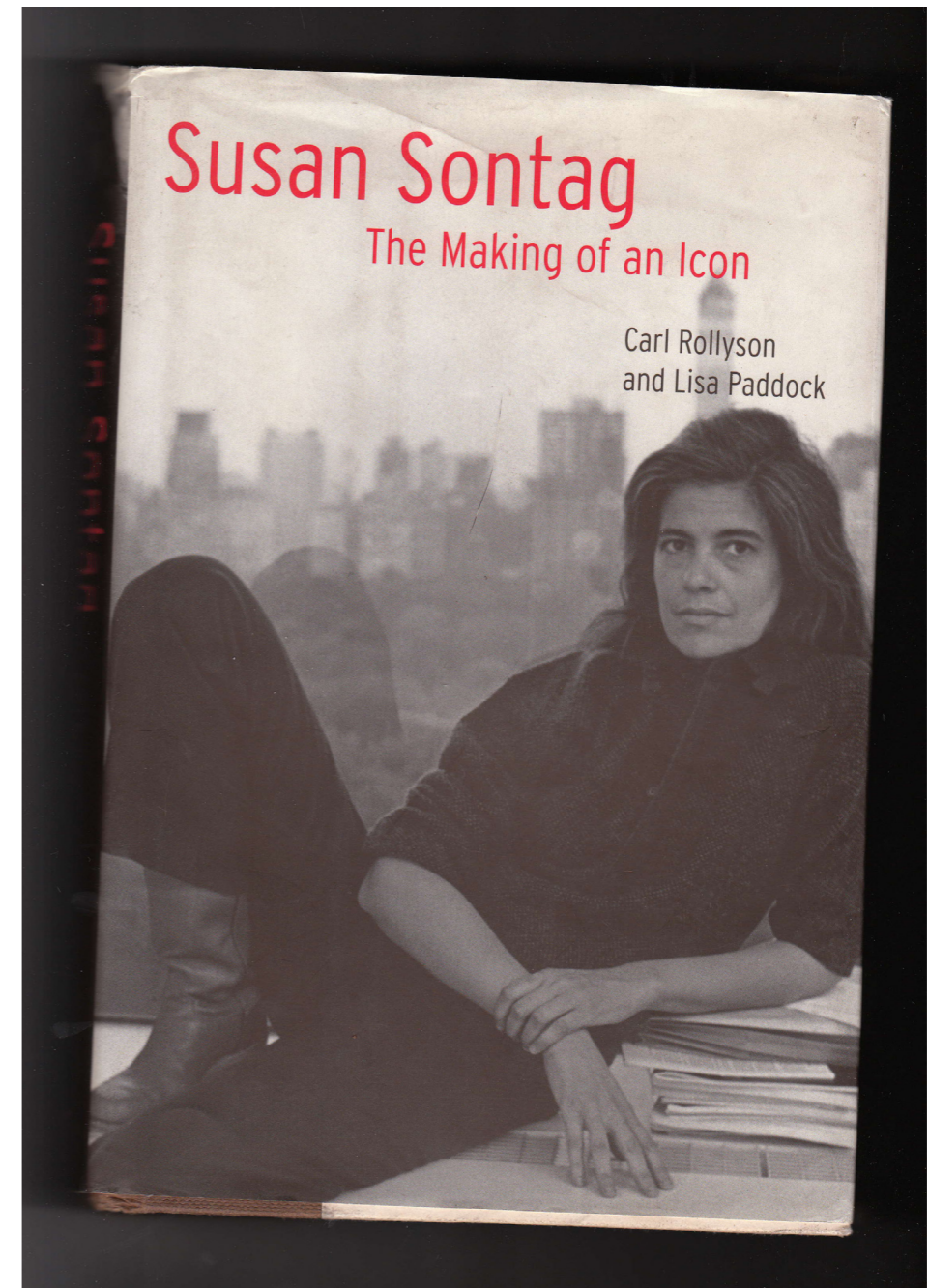
"The last achievement of the serious admirer is to stop immediately putting to work the energies aroused by, filling up the space opened by, what is admired. Thereby talented admirers give themselves permission to breathe, to breathe more deeply. But for that it is necessary to go beyond avidity; to identify with something beyond achievement, beyond the gathering of power."



## Erotics

Susan Sontag had distinctive, iconic hair: Thick and black, with a white skunk-like shock emanating from her right temple. She smoked cigarettes even after being diagnosed with breast cancer, and upon renewing my obsession with her, I have begun smoking again as well. When she wrote about writers she admired, she was seductive, impassioned, subjective, specific. The writing is like love letters across time written with careful intimacy probing the habits and intensities of the life of the mind. The feeling is like that in the film *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, when the lovers lounge in bed for endless hours, passing cigarettes back and forth, reading aloud, revealing anxieties, hesitating, gesticulating. Their bodies sweat language, the mind is present, palpable in the sticky heat of the bedsheets.

In college I had a roommate a few years older than me, a painter who worked long days in a used bookshop. His daily ritual began with one cup of decaf coffee on the back porch while he waited to shit, then to work, arriving home around five to put a potato in the oven and descend the stairs to his basement studio to paint. Two hours later he would climb the stairs, eat his potato and steak, and begin drinking cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon. This schedule was repeated without variation for over a year. Regular observance of it made me wild with desire. If he had been more erratic I might have lost interest, but the predictability of his bodily movement, the ritualization, and the gradual accumulation of a power resembling theatre, was mesmerizing to me.



## Teenagers

For the past month, I have been teaching reading at a public high school. Reading with students, I find that they are bored by abstraction, but the moment a reference to the body is made, they giggle, they fidget, they crack jokes. Booby traps, virgins, rape, guns, violence and death excite them. They asked me last Friday if a woman could be impregnated by a horse. They want to know the technicalities of death by gunfire. Why the faces of Downs syndrome people resemble one another, with wide-set eyes and high foreheads. Can AIDS be transmitted through a doorknob, or through rubbing your bloody arm on the bloody arm of someone else. This teenaged preoccupation with the body is the pulse of Sontag's early work, sublimated into descriptions of formal methodology.



## Lovesickness

I have smoked five cigarettes and eaten four peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and drunk two glasses of instant espresso and three cups of soy milk. The blood in my veins is not flowing smoothly in its customary path to the heart, but jostling back and forth, retracing its every step like the California raisin conga line commercial; I am jumpy. I am not precise enough to write this lecture. I pick up a book of essays by Cynthia Ozick – another Jewish intellectual from the late twentieth century, and open it randomly to an essay called Lovesickness. The author fell in love with her friend's husband at their wedding. She plunges through the facts in the first few sentences. She has known the bride since childhood but they were not close – they had differing temperaments. She was short, the bride tall, she was naïve, grave and obtuse, the bride wielded an icy wit. The groom's thighs were taut, the essay charged, dramatic, and escalating, a series of heightening hyperboles connected by the breathless "or," at the end of every sentence like the voice of a precocious child doing the dozens on herself in order to keep her distractable mother listening. *I* was certainly listening. She receives a postcard from the groom while the couple is honeymooning on a cruise ship, and after caressing the card for weeks, she finally knows what to do,

"I took my pencil and slowly, slowly traced over the letters of the first word. Slowly, slowly. The sensation was that of a novice dancer mimicking the movements of a ballet master; or of a mute mouth speaking through a ventriloquist; or of a shadow following a light; or of a mountain climber ascending the upward slope of a t, stopping to rest on

the horizontal shelf of the crossbar, again toiling upward, turning, again resting on a ledge, and then sliding downward along a sheerly vertical wall. Letter by letter, day by day, I pressed the point of my pencil into the fleshy lines of the sea-borne bridegroom's pen; I jumped my pencil over his jumps and skips, those minute blank sites of his pen's apnea. In a week or so it was finished. I had coupled with him. Every letter was laboriously Siamese-twinning. Each of the letters bore on its back the graphite coat I had slowly, slowly laid over it. Breath by breath, muscle by muscle, nerve by nerve, with the concentration of a monkish scribe, with the dedication of a Torah scribe, I had trod in his tracks and made his marks. Like a hunter, I had pursued his marks; I had trapped and caged them. I was his fanatical, indelible Doppelganger. And a forger besides."

This lovesickness is the reason to write. If both Ozick and Sontag are writing out of love, then why are their voices so different? I raise my head from the book and stare again at the brick wall across the street I have been watching all day. The room is almost dark now, the sky a washy lavender. An image of Sontag, a tall, solemn young woman, silent in an open doorway. Ozick is piggybacking, forging; for her, writing is athletic and intimate. It is making love to the writing she reads. For Sontag, no matter how close she is able to get to the writer, she always makes herself invisible, a secret watcher, not laid on top like Ozick's graphite coats.

## Voyeurism

Sontag was a voyeur, privately getting off on a secretive watching; this adolescent eroticism, coupled with intellectual precision creates the pulse in her writing; the tension between fastidious mental activity and the body in constant, insatiable revolt. Her essays depict the artist alone, encased in deep hypnotic solitude; the silence of creation, punctuated by the mental equivalents of wailing, tearing at the hair, scraping the skin. Words like excruciating (pain) and voluptuous (pleasure) abound, and are applied to activities of the mind.



## The Image

Derrida has written that in order to make an impact on the beloved text, one must make an incision and literally suture oneself inside the language. Gilles Deleuze uses the graphic metaphor of bugging the book – fucking it up the ass to birth a bastard love child. Susan Sontag's method was less violent, but more cinematic. She has inserted her image. That Face, that Hair; the legendary slouching posture and leonine observant gaze. Her clothing, an update on the velvet jackets and ruffled sleeves of the dandy, the bright white sneakers and the filing cabinets in the background of the photos are signifiers of the Modern. It is her salute, in late modernity, to the power of the image. It wouldn't have worked if her writing was weak, or if her writing didn't absolutely complement her image, in the opening to her novel, *In America*, from 2000 "Irresolute, no, shivering, I'd crashed a party in the private dining room of a hotel." The "I" here is Sontag herself, listening to a party, describing and finding her characters simultaneously. "Adam, Jan, Zygmunt. I tried to think of the name that would best suit him. For every person has such a name, usually the name that he or she is given." As she wrote in *On Style*, "Our manner of appearing *is* our manner of being. The mask *is* the face." *In America* is a historical novel – based on a true story, and she has chosen to be silent and invisible, (she moves around the room listening, watching, creating,) yet of course she is doubled, both crashing the party, and also (as I picture her) in her study in New York City, surrounded by books and photographs, gazing out the window, listening, writing the novel.

Later in *In America*, the character Maryna, an internationally renowned actress, explains to her lover, a writer, why they must part, "You're asking me, and you have every right to ask me, if I really do love you. And I want to say – oh dearest Ryszard, you know what I *want* to say. And that wanting is love, too, though not the kind you mean. But the truth is, I never know exactly what I feel when I am not on a stage. No, that's not true. I feel intense interest, curiosity, pity, anxiety, desire to please – all that. But love, what you mean by love, what you want from me ... I'm not sure. I know I don't feel love the way I represent it before an audience. Maybe I don't feel much of anything at all."



## Notes on Susan Sontag

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