

Three Elegies for Susan Sontag

March 8, 2010

1. Art

WHEN I WAS FINDING my voice as a writer in the thick of the sixties, Susan Sontag loomed large: she was among the relatively few literary intellectuals who were seriously trying to grapple with a new, rich, and, for many, disconcerting cultural situation. The title essay of her first collection, *Against Interpretation*, combined a formidable erudition about the avant-garde with a manifesto-like plea that critics end their one-sided emphasis on teasing out the meaning of art and embrace their pleasure in it. "What is important now," she wrote, "is to recover our senses. We must learn to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more . . . In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art."

The arch- interpreters of the modernist canon, Marx and Freud, had in Sontag's view outlived their usefulness. Film, she declared, was "the most alive, the most exciting, the most important of all art forms right now" because its vivid immediacy discouraged interpretation. The reason, in part, was "the happy accident that films for such a long time were just movies; in other words, that they were supposed to be part of mass, as opposed to high, culture, and were left alone by most people with minds." Another essay in the same volume, "One Culture and the New Sensibility," argued that the distinction between high and low culture was breaking down and that the hallmark of the "new sensibility" was its orientation toward non-literary forms. "Sensations, feelings, the abstract forms and styles of sensibility": this was the stuff of contemporary art. Sontag also lauded the psychoanalytic radicalism of Norman O. Brown, who, unlike Freud or the bland Freudian "revisionists" of the day, insisted on the primacy of the body and on utopia as Dionysian ecstasy. And then there was the essay that made her famous, "Notes on Camp," which put all these strains of thought, or sensibility, together in a form that by abandoning linear exegesis for a series of epigrammatic "notes" embodied her point and was fun besides.

These essays were highly iconoclastic works in the context of Sontag's milieu. At the time they were published, literary intellectuals had two major preoccupations — defending high art against mass art, which, in Dwight Macdonald's inimitable formulation, was considered not art at all but merely a commodity like chewing gum; and rescuing civilization from, as they saw it, the barbarians and antinomian nihilists of the radical counterculture. Those few who tried to relate to, say, pop music, did painful things like analyzing Beatles songs to show how much like high art they were. In our turn, writers of my generation who were cultural and sexual radicals and had passionate mass-cultural loyalties — to movies and even more to rock and roll — regarded literary intellectuals as uncomprehending dinosaurs; our models were journalists like Pauline Kael and Tom Wolfe.

I don't remember how Sontag first came to my attention. It could have been through an article about her: she was something of a star, after all. In those days I didn't read avant-garde quarterlies like *Partisan Review*, and it had never occurred to me to write for them. Looking back, I see that it could easily have been otherwise, were it not for the fifties' gender politics that still prevailed in my college years. I was an English major at Barnard around the time that budding critics like Marshall Berman and Morris Dickstein were across the street studying with the likes of Lionel Trilling; but the Columbia English department would not allow Barnard women in its classes. Instead, I won the competition to become a summer guest editor at *Mademoiselle*, as Sylvia Plath had done some years before. (Like its masculine equivalent *Esquire*, *Mademoiselle* was once an important venue for literary journalism; in fact, Sontag's essay "One Culture and the New Sensibility" was originally published there.)

Later, the advent of the "new journalism" convinced me that writing for popular magazines could be more than a lark, that it had potent aesthetic and intellectual rewards; and this path also appealed to my interest in mass cultural forms. But Susan Sontag presented me with another possibility, which I must have taken in, though I don't remember consciously doing so: that one could write in her tone of high seriousness, and draw on high-cultural references, and still engage with contemporary pop culture and cultural radicalism on their own terms.

As the sixties' cultural upheaval gave way to seventies cultural austerity, Sontag retreated to a more conservative stance on aesthetic issues. Her prime concern was no longer achieving an erotics of art, but parsing the morality of art. Or rather, the erotics of art — the pleasure we derived from it — became something to be questioned and inspected for its darker, often sadomasochistic aspects. In *On Photography*, it was the potential for aggression, manipulation, and bad faith that caught Sontag's imagination (as it had done Walter Benjamin's): photographer, viewer, and the multifaceted object that lay between them were always guilty until proven innocent. "Fascinating Fascism" eloquently attacked the readiness of critics to abstract the beauty of Leni Riefenstahl's films and photographs from the moral implications of an aesthetic that validated and promoted the Nazis' world view — "the force of her work being precisely in the continuity of its aesthetic and political ideas." The essay implied some rethinking of Sontag's own past standpoint: "Art which evokes the themes of fascist aesthetic is popular now, and for most people is probably no more than a variant of camp . . . 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 . . . Taste is context, and the context has changed."

The changed context was American society's aggressive repudiation of sixties utopianism. In 1996, in the preface to a new Spanish translation of *Against Interpretation*, Sontag wrote that while she still agreed with most of the positions she had taken, "The world in which these essays were written no longer exists . . . The ever more triumphant values of consumer capitalism promote — indeed, impose — the cultural mixes and insolence and defense of pleasure that I was advocating for quite different reasons." Her once-dissident enthusiasms had become widespread, owing to forces she had not at the time understood. "Barbarism," she declared, "is one name for what was taking over. Let's use Nietzsche's term: we had entered, really entered, the age of nihilism." I imagine a smiling Theodor Adorno, welcoming Sontag home. This is the Frankfurt School's language of profound pessimism, a language that most of Sontag's peers never relinquished. I suspect it came more naturally to her than her moment of openness to a short-lived current of hope.

The truth is that the process of assimilating the counterculture to the mainstream — a process to which mass consumption was central — was already going on in 1966, when *Against Interpretation* was published and my rock critic friends and I were trying to make sense of what was happening as the Beatles sold millions of records while announcing they were more popular than Jesus. The culture was complex then as it is complex, if much scarier, now. The question remains: what of human possibility? Do we simply abandon the idea?

A few years ago, listening to Sontag speak at a panel discussion sponsored by the NYU journalism department, where I teach, I was startled by her wholesale, contemptuous dismissal of American popular culture. There was an enormous gap between her critique of Riefenstahl's defenders — which represented high-culture moral indignation at its most cogent and pointed — and this kind of free-floating animus: Sontag, it seemed, had ended up, well, a curmudgeon. Yet her early work remains a testament to boundaries that could be crossed, worlds that could come together in new ways. "Camp taste," she wrote, "is a kind of love, love for human nature. It relishes, rather than judges, the little triumphs and awkward intensities of 'character' . . . Camp is a tender feeling." Yes.

2. Politics

SUSAN SONTAG BELIEVED that intellectuals should, must, take political stands. She was active in the movement against the Vietnam War. She tried, with passion and persistence, to awaken American and European consciences to the genocidal catastrophe in Bosnia. And yet I would not call Sontag a political thinker. For Sontag, politics was an arena for practicing the high moral style. It was about the individual bearing witness. It was, in another of its aspects, about the writer defending literary values, the values of civilization, when they were under siege, as they were in Sarajevo. It was a question of will. Politics, however, is preeminently about social structures, collective behavior — or mass psychology — and the relation between the two. It is a question of understanding, and a question of power.

If Marx and Freud were enemies in the quest for an erotics of art, they were even more clearly antagonists of a politics of personal morality. They regarded morals as the product of social and psychic structures, respectively: this was why moralists' lofty values were never achieved in real life. For Marx, understanding the social structure was key to political revolution; for radical Freudians if not for Freud himself, understanding the libidinal structure made possible a revolution in culture.

Sontag's attitude was more in line with the strain of American liberalism that, in the years after 1945, regarded morality as the antidote to totalitarianism of the right and left: it was this stance that impelled her to statements like "Communism is fascism with a human face" — though in fact fascism and Communism, while having certain features in common, are fundamentally different in social structure and mass psychology both. This has also been the ethos of dissident Eastern European intellectuals, which characterizes the post-Soviet era. My own approach to politics owes much to Marx and Freud. In my view, Eastern Europe has suffered gravely from the refusal of its intellectuals to think seriously, in a political way, about structures like class, gender, and religion. I believe Bosnia was able to happen, and people who should have known better were able to ignore it, because we have never really come to terms with the confluence of historical, power-political, cultural and psychological forces that produced the Holocaust. Moral condemnation alone will not keep these atrocities from happening again and again.

Individuals bearing witness do not change history; only movements that understand their social world can do that. Movements encourage solidarity; the moral individual is likely, all unwittingly, to do the opposite, for bearing witness is lonely: it breeds feelings of superiority and moralistic anger against those who are not doing the same. Sontag often succumbed to this temptation. Frustrated that the Bosnian cause did not arouse intellectuals as the Spanish Civil War had done, she accused them of middle-class selfishness and complacency. That there might be reasons other than personal moral turpitude that others did not share her urgency — a depoliticized time, the confusion and despair of the left, the lack of a social analysis that could put the Balkan events in context — did not occur to her, or so it seemed.

Still, I do not dismiss Sontag's moral challenge. For along with understanding, there must after all be will. It is one thing to understand how our conscience is formed; yet since we can't, except in the most marginal ways, undo the twists and turns of our formation, conscience is what we are stuck with — if we are lucky. Conscience may be a false front, but its absence is deathly. Individuals bearing witness cannot do the work of social movements, but they can break a corrosive and demoralizing silence. It was, then, a good thing, an important thing, that Sontag went to Sarajevo, and kept going there, and wrote about it, and wouldn't shut up. Her voice was hectoring, irritating, cranky, on-her-high-horse superior. But what it said was true.

3. Death

ALTHOUGH SONTAG LIVED for many years with the disease that finally killed her, she never wrote about that experience, except obliquely. "Illness," she declared in one of her more famous polemics, "is *not* a metaphor . . . the most truthful way of regarding illness — and the healthiest way of being ill — is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking." Disease, as Sontag conceived of it, was a brute, dumb fact. The cultural baggage that produced the imagination of cancer as a "ruthless, secret invasion" or the expression of a sexually inhibited, emotionally resigned character was an artifact of mystery; just as the romanticism that had once surrounded tuberculosis lost its potency with the advent of antibiotics, so would the myths that defined our fear of cancer, once "its etiology becomes as clear and its treatment as effective as those of TB have become." In the meantime, metaphor merely served to terrorize and stigmatize the sufferer, on whom the public's anxiety-ridden fantasies were projected.

"Illness as Metaphor" — which originated as a lecture, became a *New York Review* essay, then a small book, and eventually acquired a companion essay, "AIDS and its Metaphors" — is, like so much of Sontag's work, at once bold and problematic. It is also, in a sense, out of date. Since 1978, when it first appeared, both the ubiquity, which is to say familiarity, of cancer and improvements in its treatment have robbed the disease of much of the mythological aura that Sontag railed against. At the same time, the backlash against psychoanalysis has banished from the public conversation the theory, advanced by the radical psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, that most excited Sontag's indignation: that cancer has its genesis in sexual and emotional repression. The conventional wisdom now tracks Sontag's own views, in some measure, perhaps, because of her influence. Yet as a Sontag document "Illness" retains its fascination, in part because it is her only commentary on this fateful passage in her life, but more, perhaps, because of the conundrum it poses: this is the work of a writer whose passion was language rejecting metaphor as a means of understanding; a critic whose central subject matter was aesthetics, morality, and the relation between them stating categorically that illness has no aesthetic or moral meaning.

It makes sense to resist metaphors that aim to punish or control, reduce or falsify experience — indeed to acknowledge that even the aptest metaphor is a flawed prism, that we see through a glass darkly. But it does not follow that metaphoric thinking can simply be purged in favor of a "healthy" transparency. I am not of the school of thought that regards all human experience as reducible to language; the body, in my view, is not simply a discourse; but describing the body and its relation to the mind and the world is another matter. What Sontag does not seem to grasp is that the allopathic medical model of disease, as an entity entirely external to the person, with an objective cause and cure, is as metaphorical as any other, based on the larger metaphors of Cartesian philosophy and Newtonian science. And as a description, it's at best incomplete. We float in a sea of pathogens, microbial and chemical, natural and artificial, yet only some of us, sometimes, become seriously ill; or more precisely, our bodies falter and die at different rates, on different timetables, in different ways, despite the shared hazards of our condition. So too with our ability to recover. As a way of recognizing these facts, the psychoanalytic metaphors of libido and repression, conflict and defense may be closer to the mark.

Disease takes hold when the immune system fails, when external agent meets internal vulnerability. What makes us vulnerable? Today's common sense says "genes" — yet we know that genes represent the potential rather than the actual, and that the relation between genetic potential and its expression is complex and obscure: what mediates is our environment, but also our experience. We know that emotion affects the body — its heart and respiration rates, its hormone flow, its muscle tensions. Surely it is conceivable that disappointments we cannot bear to acknowledge or express directly might express themselves in physical form.

That this idea has so often been crudely translated into blame — as if the ill deliberately and perversely choose their disappointments, and their denials, and so their diseases — is the result of

people's tendency to conflate it with yet another (and in our culture far more powerful) metaphorical system, a system dedicated to the idea of the abstract, disembodied will: Judeo-Christian morality. The *New Testament* tells us "the wages of sin is death"; the Jewish formulation is *mida k'neged mida* (measure for measure). If the concept of psychosomatic illness is regularly misused to add to the misery of the ill, is this justification enough to discard it altogether? What might sufferers themselves lose by doing so?

Shortly after I was asked to write an obituary for Sontag — a woman whose writing and public statements always made me feel as if we were enmeshed in an ongoing conversation, usually an argument — my ruminations on her and "Illness is Metaphor" took a more personal turn: I received my own cancer diagnosis. Caught early, amenable to the latest advances of allopathic medicine — still, the disease did not strike me as a brute, dumb fact. A life-threatening illness, it seemed to me, was a spiritual crisis by definition. Unanswerable questions about etiology were the least of it (though in truth I was instantly swamped — I imagine the ghost of Susan stifling a smirk — by a wave of superstitious terror and guilt, produced by the fantasy that every mean-spirited thought, let alone act, I'd ever committed had somehow converged in an unlikely spot on my non-smoker's lung). The real questions were about the future.

When clichés (that is, stale metaphors) about the precariousness of life suddenly present themselves as nothing less than the simple, compelling truth, it concentrates the mind. How best to further one's recovery, and how to live in the meantime? Exert all one's energies toward forging on, so as not to be dominated by the disease? Or revise one's priorities, focus on what's most important and jettison the rest? (And what *is* most important — love? work? attention to the precious sensations of living?) Make health a central project, or refuse to be obsessed? What to put on the soundtrack — the Clash or John Fahey? Mahler or Arvo Part? And if it is not possible to do without metaphor, what metaphors suit? "You are in a war," a friend wrote me: the military metaphor being the most common of all and another for which Sontag has no use. Was I in a war — a civil war, perhaps, against my own rogue cells? Who was the enemy, exactly? Or was my ordeal more like a marathon swim against an undertow?

Interestingly, "Illness" begins with a metaphor. "I want," Sontag tells us, "to describe not what it is really like to emigrate to the kingdom of the ill and live there, but the punitive or sentimental fantasies concocted about that situation: not real geography but stereotypes of national character." This is a book without a protagonist, set in a terrain without inhabitants; or rather they are opaque, their presence revealed only by the tropes that surround them, as black holes are detected by a bent gravitational field. It is a somber silence, befitting the author's funeral; for death is truly the kingdom where metaphors come to an end.

Footnotes