

Sontag as Metaphor

About: Benjamin Moser, *Sontag: Her Life and Work*,
New York, Ecco

By Benjamin BALINT

In this new biography of Susan Sontag, Benjamin Moser draws on hundreds of interviews, on the first two volumes of her journals and on her diaries to offer a fascinating portrait of a woman driven to extremities both personal and intellectual.

“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.”

Is the author of this observation herself this kind of culture-hero? In his definitive, authorized 800-page biography of Susan Sontag, Benjamin Moser offers a fascinating portrait of a woman driven to extremities both personal and intellectual. He draws on hundreds of interviews, on the first two volumes of her journals—published as *Reborn* (2008) and *As Consciousness Is Harnessed to Flesh* (2012)—and on her diaries—almost a hundred notebooks—that she had sold to the University of California at Los Angeles. The result is a portrait both fuller and more ambivalent than a previous unauthorized biography by Carl E. Rollyson and Lisa Paddock (*Susan Sontag: The Making of an Icon*, 2000).

“Every kind of life”

“What I really wanted was every kind of life,” she told the *Paris Review*, “and the writer’s life seemed the most inclusive.” Not that she enjoyed writing *per se*. “I find writing very desexualizing,” she said to an interviewer, “which is one of its limitations. I don’t eat, or I eat very irregularly and badly and skip meals, and I try to sleep as little as possible. My back hurts, my fingers hurt, I get headaches. And it even cuts sexual desire.”

Sontag learned how to wield her weapon at *Partisan Review*, where she began to write in 1962, and where she published her breakthrough essay, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” in 1964. In that essay, Sontag describes “camp” as a mode of homosexual sensibility and evokes a style of extravagance that matched the emerging New Left (“the whole point of camp is to dethrone the serious”). But she also pointed to a counterbalance. “The two pioneering forces of modern sensibility,” she wrote there, “are Jewish moral seriousness and homosexual aestheticism and irony.”

However well she harnessed those two forces, Sontag never wrote a full-scale nonfiction book. Her natural unit of expression—best suited to her avidity for knowing—was the essay. Her first book of essays, *Against Interpretation* (1966), designates interpretation as “the enemy of art,” or more precisely the enemy of a more immediate and sensual appreciation of art. In the title essay she remarks: “To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world—in order to set up a shadow world of ‘meanings.’... Interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art.” Describing herself as a “besotted aesthete,” Sontag would champion the aesthetic over the ethical, style over content. The book launched her career as a public intellectual. When the book commanded wide attention, Norman Podhoretz, editor of *Commentary* magazine, called Sontag “the Dark Lady of American Letters.” Herbert Marcuse remarked on her flair for abstraction. “She can make a theory out of a potato peel,” he said (p. 143).

A woman of letters, in Sontag’s vaulting ambition, was more than a literary critic. “She valued her work as a fiction writer far more than anything else she did,” her son David said. “Fiction writing alone had brought her pleasure as a writer.” Yet her first two novels were not kindly received. *The Benefactor* (1963), published when

she was thirty, narrates the monologue of a man obsessed with his dreams. Writing in the *New Yorker*, Janet Malcolm called it “a very advanced kind of experiment in unreadability.” Cynthia Ozick said it “reads like an audacious, sly, somewhat stilted translation from the French of a nineteenth-century philosophical memoir... *The Benefactor* has no beneficiaries.” Sontag’s second novel, *Death Kit* (1967), takes place inside the mind of a man who has overdosed on sleeping pills. It prompted the *New York Times* reviewer to ponder how “a critic of Susan Sontag’s refined sensibilities can write fiction that is both tedious and demonstrably insensitive to the craft of fiction.”

Regarding the Politics of Others

Moser, in turn, ponders Sontag’s more notorious political pronouncements from the 1960’s: “The white race,” she announced in 1967, “is the cancer of human history.”¹ She deemed America a “too white, death-ridden culture.” She spoke of Che Guevara and Fidel Castro as “heroes and cherished models.” In 1968, as part of a delegation of antiwar activists, she made the first of two trips to North Vietnam. In the resulting essay, “Trip to Hanoi,” she portrayed Ho Chi Minh’s country as “a deeply civil society” where “they genuinely love and admire their leaders; and, even more inconceivable to us, the government loves the people.” She found “a place which, in many respects, *deserves* to be idealized.”

Sontag had a somewhat better record vis-à-vis Israel, where she directed a movie about the Yom Kippur War of 1973. After the war, she told a reporter in Jerusalem: “I’m proud to be a Jew, I identify very much with other Jews, and by temperament I’m predisposed to Israel” (p. 345).²

Later in the 1970s, Sontag changed her tune on Communism after meeting Joseph Brodsky, Heriberto Padilla (a poet tortured in Cuba), the Polish writer Jarosław Anders, and other émigrés who had fled persecution under Communist regimes. In an impromptu 1982 speech in support of the Solidarity movement in Poland, she declared: “Communism is in itself a variant, the most successful variant, of Fascism. Fascism with a human face.” Moser glosses: “She did not become a neoconservative,

¹ “What’s Happening in America,” *Partisan Review*, Winter 1967. Reprinted in *Styles of Radical Will* (1969).

² In May 2000, Sontag went to Israel to accept the Jerusalem Prize over the objections of Nadine Gordimer and Edward Said, both of whom urged her to boycott the ceremony.

Norman Podhoretz with a human face. Instead, she became a liberal, that scourge of radicals right and left" (p. 437).

She returned to her natural métier: cultural critic. *On Photography* (1977) is a collection of six essays, unadorned by a single illustrative photograph, by a writer who didn't own a camera. Sontag laments that the economy of images suffers from overproduction, and therefore from a dulling of the senses. "Whatever the moral claims made on behalf of photography, its main effect is to convert the world into a department store or museum-without-walls in which every subject is depreciated into an article of consumption, promoted into an item for aesthetic appreciation."

A diagnosis of breast cancer in the mid-70's resulted in a mastectomy followed by thirty months of chemotherapy. The ordeal also yielded an eighty-seven-page book, *Illness as Metaphor* (1978), in which Sontag counters evasive language about illness and "the punitive or sentimental fantasies" about cancer and tuberculosis, "theories that diseases are caused by mental states and can be cured by willpower." She counters these moralistic mythologies without mentioning her own cancer. A sequel, *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989), featured not a word about her own sexuality. The message of both books: "Don't interpret illness." Here too she is against interpretation.

Beginning in 1993, Sontag would visit the besieged city of Sarajevo eleven times. Moser commends Sontag for staging a performance on her second visit there of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. "If praise and prosperity brought out the worst in her," Moser writes, "oppression and destitution brought out the best.... She put her body on the line, and bore witness, and earned universal respect" (p. 565). Sontag contrasted her own sangfroid with Joan Baez, who said had been too terrified by the mortars to come out of her hotel room.

Having survived breast cancer in the 70's and uterine cancer in 1998, Sontag succumbed to leukemia in 2004. She was 71.

The Making of an Icon

Moser sets out to write not merely the biography of a writer, but of an iconic image. To the British writer Zoë Heller, Sontag insisted that “despite all the attention that has been paid to my person, I’m not at all interested in being famous.” Yet sat for the photographers Robert Mapplethorpe, Irving Penn, Peter Hujar, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Richard Avedon and Annie Leibovitz. She made brief appearances in films by Woody Allen (*Zelig*) and Andy Warhol (*Screen Tests*). “Saturday Night Live” kept a “Sontag wig,” with its trademark white streak, in its wardrobe department as “a comic synecdoche for the New York intellectual.”

The writer Ted Solotaroff (an editor at *Commentary*, where Sontag worked in 1959), articulated this duality: “Like the celebrity that Sontag appears to court with her left hand and disclaim with her right, her critical stance somehow managed to be both matter-of-fact and outrageous: a tone that gets under the skin in much the same way that those dust-jacket photographs of her—poised, striking, vaguely sinister—either seduce or repel.”

On the one hand, Moser is seduced by the figure he calls “America’s last great literary star” (p. 4). Describing Sontag as “intimidatingly erudite,” he praises the way she “set the terms of the cultural debate in a way that no intellectual had done before, or has done since” (p. 704). But he also finds discolorations in the dazzlement. He records the pretentious confidence in her own belabored seriousness (or strenuousness), in pursuit of what she called “the hot exaltations of the mind.” (In one of her short stories, Sontag describes a character as “the slave of seriousness.”) He cannot evade his subject’s hauteur. “Good writers are roaring egotists,” she writes in her journal at age twenty-four, “even to the point of fatuity” (p. 166). Here, for example, is Sontag’s roaring self-assessment in 1978:

In every era, there are three teams of writers. The first team: those who have become known, gain “stature,” become reference points for their contemporaries writing in the same language... The second team: international—those who become reference points for their contemporaries throughout Europe, the Americas, Japan, etc.... The third team: those who become reference points for

successive generations in many languages (e.g. Kafka). I'm already on the first team, on the verge of being admitted to the second—want only to play on the third.

Moser shows how this kind of utterance masked Sontag's inconsolable loneliness, sense of inadequacy, and what he calls her "lacerating insecurities." "I feel myself a prisoner of revulsion," she wrote, "finding most everyone with whom I have contact ugly and shallow" (p. 407). As Moser recounts, many found her diva-like tantrums intolerable. "While Good Susan was brilliant and funny and loyal and rather grand," Salman Rushdie said, "Bad Susan could be a bullying monster."

Above all, Moser is repelled by Sontag's lifelong refusal to come out publicly as a lesbian. He chronicles her relationships with Harriet Sohmers, translator into English of Sade's *Misfortunes of Virtue*; with the Cuban-born painter playwright Irene Fornés; with the Vienna-born ex-Trotskyist Eva Kollisch; with the Rothschild heiress Nicole Stéphane; with the dancer and choreographer Lucinda Childs; and finally with Annie Leibovitz, celebrity photographer for *Rolling Stone* and *Vanity Fair*. In none of these did Sontag find—or expect to find—happiness. "All relationships are essentially masochistic," she said (p. 163).

Both seduced and repelled, Moser embeds at heart of this biography a distinction between the all-too-human Sontag and what he calls "the symbolic Sontag." "Sontag's real importance increasingly lay in what she *represented*," Moser concludes. "The metaphor of 'Susan Sontag' was a great original creation. It rose far above her individual life, and outlived her" (p. 650). To which the culture-hero might reply, as she does in her essay "On Style": "metaphors mislead."

Benjamin Moser, *Sontag: Her Life and Work*, New York, Ecco, 2019, 832 pp., 39,99\$.

