tended the victory rally, as if it were an earthly second coming? Home, or to a quest for home, the postcolonial home not confined to South Africa, a place that is "the final destination of the human spirit beyond national boundaries, natal traditions." In her readings of Mahfouz's *The Cairo Trilogy*, Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* and Oz's *Fima*, she finds her new constituency: "These writers know *who* they are, their work is no part of the Euro-American search for identity; what it expresses is the sense that it is not that the individual does not know himself, it is that, as Amos Oz's character Fima says, '*his place does not know him.*' "

In Gordimer's readings of these three writers—the Arab, the African and the Jew—the awkward girl from the gold-mining town in the veld, the outsider, hits pay dirt. Forget the lectern; her voice is oddly unpublic, subdued by the pleasure of reading. These are close readings full of discovery and admiration. Her discussion of Mahfouz's *Cairo Trilogy* clarifies why a history of political, sexual and domestic tyranny demands the time and space of a trilogy in which to play out in full both family novel and novel of ideas; and also explains how Mahfouz extends perspective by shifting focus from a dominant story, that of the patriarchal al-Sayyid Ahmad, to the sensibility of a minor figure through whom the attendant characters come to see a "dimension of comprehension that cannot be theirs."

This fear of limitation and hope of transcendence is a recurrent theme in *Writing and Being*. It can be seen in Gordimer's careful tracking in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* of disparate voices, dialects, tired anecdotes and ineffectual arguments that separate the characters: The pidgin of the marketplace and the diction of those educated at an English university must be made intelligible across social and racial bounds. Oz's Fima, a poet who can no longer write, is silenced by social, political and personal confusion. He yearns for verbal control, for a humane articulation in himself and others while arguing most persuasively to himself, speaking most compassionately to a lizard, a fellow being. In the act of reading, Gordimer provides the dramatic center for her lectures. Here is the display of vitality that sustains the rhetorical performance.

The multiple voices of a polyphonic novel are what hold Gordimer's imagination in these lectures; she has crossed borders, chosen these novels politically as well as artistically, for the work of the Arab, the African and the Jew is where she has moved in her search for home. That these writers stand apart from their societies to take risks and have suffered the consequences makes them her natural comrades. Their essential attraction lies in the power of their work, which is free of ideology, full of an energy she can draw from their fiction as it explores "in art *what really exists* beneath the surface." "In art" is the telling phrase she will not give up on.

I note that the verb in the title of the last lecture, "The Other World That Was the World," refers to a culture of the past, while the title *Writing and Being* is present tense. Returning to her source in the last lecture, she calls upon personal reminiscence and grand historical summation to bring together past and present. Reminding her audience of her colonial childhood—in which the desirable world was one of absurdly inappropriate British culture and Fred and Ginger movies—she reconnects us to the history of her time and place. In her many roles as outsider—white, artist, woman, colonial—she has been conscious that she must justify herself in the history of writing from South Africa, that her place did not know her, that she could not fully know her place. The final words of Gordimer's Harvard lectures may be difficult for Americans with an underdeveloped sense of a historical present, for they are spoken as from a Stockholm of the mind, elevated and ceremonial: "That other world that was the world is no longer the world. My country is the world, whole, a synthesis. I am no longer a colonial. I may now speak of 'my people.' " She need not worry about the "creative authority" of that eloquent voice. She's allowed. □

Premature Postmodern

LARISSA MACFARQUHAR

SUSAN SONTAG: Mind as Passion. *By Liam Kennedy. Manchester. 141 pp. $35.*

There are certain poignant little facts sprinkled around us by that novelist in the sky that convey with especial vividness the gulf between past and present. One of these facts is that in the sixties some people considered Susan Sontag to be lacking in seriousness. Listen to Irving Howe writing in *Commentary* in 1968:

> We are confronting, then, a new phase in our culture, which in motive and spring represents a wish to shake off the bleeding heritage of modernism and reinstate one of those periods of the collective naif which seem endemic to American experience . . . The new American sensibility does something no other culture could have aspired to: it makes nihilism seem casual, good-natured, even innocent. . . Alienation has been transformed from a serious and revolutionary concept into a motif of mass culture, and the content of modernism into the decor of *kitsch*. . . . [This new sensibility] is reinforced with critical exegesis by Susan Sontag, a publicist able to make brilliant quilts from grandmother's patches.

In 1968, at 35, Sontag was both a popular icon and one of the country's most respected critics. She wrote for *Partisan Review* and *Esquire*, for *Mademoiselle* and *The New York Review of Books*. She had published her first novel, *The Benefactor*, in 1963, her second, *Death Kit*, in 1967 and her first essay collection, *Against Interpretation*, in 1966. Reading it now, you can sense how exciting it must have been to pick up *Against Interpretation* in 1966, when it was unexpected: those luscious sentences, those enticing paragraphs and that curious, appreciative, calm, intelligent, *innocent* voice, without a trace of knowingness or sarcasm, that skipped so easily between flirtatious epigrams and earnest reasoning.

At the time, compared with Stalin-era types like Howe, Sontag was indeed a girl of the *Zeitgeist*. She had railed against traditional, Howe-style literary interpretation and condemned it as "reactionary," "cowardly" and "stifling." She had resuscitated Antonin Artaud by favoring spectacle over psychologizing in art, and proclaimed the "new sensibility" to be exemplified by visual arts like cinema, dance and painting—not novels. Rejecting Clement Greenberg's and Dwight Macdonald's efforts to put a *cordon sanitaire* around the avant-garde, she had attached quotation marks to "high" and "low" culture and declared the distinction practically meaningless ("The feeling . . . given off by a Rauschenberg painting might be like that of a song by the Supremes"). She had infamously declared the white race to be "the cancer of human history" and concluded that "Mozart, Pascal,

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Boolean algebra, Shakespeare, parliamentary government, baroque churches, Newton, the emancipation of women, Kant, Marx and the Balanchine ballets don't redeem what this particular civilization has wrought upon the world."

It was clear even then that Sontag did not reject everything Howe's generation had stood for, but she gave it all a new, impertinent, sixties twist. She agreed with Lionel Trilling, for instance, that art could and should have a moral effect on consciousness, but she thought that that effect could be derived from the most disengaged, aesthetic kinds of experience. She looked for self-transcendence, yes, but she found it in pornography (though only of the most highbrow sort).

She still believed in the unity of political and cultural radicalism, that signature of Howe's generation, but was too fond of her anti-interpretive ideas to conceive of an easy connection. She loved pop culture, but for high-culture reasons: Every bit as formalist as Greenberg, she argued that the business of contemporary art should be the "analysis of and extension of sensations," for which purpose a Supremes song might indeed be as useful as a Rauschenberg painting. All of this made for a peculiar, ambivalent style: She was a rigorous sensualist, an optimistic modernist, an earnest advocate of irony, a serious champion of playfulness. She had a sophisticated understanding of the comic but no sense of humor.

As far as Howe was concerned, this ambivalence—what he saw as Sontag's pseudo-modernist trappings—made her all the more insidious. Modernism, he had concluded gloomily in another late-sixties essay, "will not die [but] live on . . . through vulgar reincarnation and parodic mimesis. . . . Not the hostility of those who came before but the patronage of those who come later—that is the torment of modernism." Sontag was one of those who came later. Howe was ludicrously wrong, of course, to suspect Sontag of lacking seriousness, or even of valuing the modernist legacy any less than he did. But he may have understood better than she where her theories were leading.

Reading Sontag now, her essays seem less to be refining ways of thinking about modernism, as she thought they were, than presaging postmodern developments. Howe predicted the mutation of modernism into postmodernism, but reading Sontag you can actually see it happening. In "Notes on 'Camp,' " you can see her vacillate between her proto-postmodern attraction to camp—its un-

apologetic aestheticism, its generous playfulness, its style—and her instinctive, modernist revulsion from its frivolous amorality ("I am strongly drawn to Camp, and almost as strongly offended by it"). In "On Style" you can see her championing formalism, surfaces and materiality against the notion of "content," but still for the old-fashioned moral reason of educating the senses: "For it is sensibility that nourishes our capacity for moral choice, and prompts our readiness to act. . . . the qualities which are intrinsic to the aesthetic experience (disinterestedness, contemplativeness, attentiveness, the awakening of the feelings) . . . are also fundamental constituents of a moral response to life."

In a 1980 essay on Elias Canetti, Sontag distinguished between "ear culture" and "eye culture"—Hebrew versus Greek, as she put it, moral versus aesthetic. "The ear," she wrote, "is the attentive sense, humbler, more passive, more immediate, less discriminating than the eye [which] . . . affirms the pleasures and the wisdom of . . . surfaces." In the sixties, it was eye culture that captured Sontag's attention. Howe worried, more than she did, that ear culture was in danger of disappearing altogether.

By the late seventies and early eighties, though, Sontag's perspective had shifted. By the time she began writing the essays that would constitute *On Photography* (1977), she had become much warier of the dehumanizing, morally neutralizing quality of the sensuous-formalist ways of thinking that she had relished before. Thinking about photography, she became suspicious of its tendency to depersonalize, to flatten value systems, to encourage satisfaction with the status quo, to fracture the wholeness of the world. In 1974 she wrote:

> 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

By 1979 Sontag had decided that Howe's worst nightmare had indeed come true. "There is really quite a close fit between avant-garde art and the values of the consumer society which needs products, constant turnover, diversity, outrage and so on," she admitted in an interview. "The consumer society is so sophisticated and so complex that it has broken down the lines between high and mass taste, between the conventional sensibility and the subversive sensibility."

A cultural elitist underrated by the right people, overrated by the wrong people, ignored by academia.

The context *has* changed. And at this point, although most of Sontag's essays seem as brilliant and relevant as they ever did, others seem hopelessly quaint. The camp sensibility that in 1964 she considered so esoteric, so private that "to talk about [it was] therefore to betray it" has of course become thoroughly mainstream—indeed irritatingly omnipresent. In the wake of deconstruction, Sontag's old formalist theories seem antiquated. It's telling, though, that that wild excess of hers she later regretted—calling the white race "the cancer of human history"—today sounds more banal than anything else, coming from a white person.

In *Susan Sontag: Mind as Passion*, Liam Kennedy sets out to describe Sontag's work and the context within which it appeared. It's Kennedy's first book; he's a lecturer in American and Canadian Studies at the University of Birmingham in England. Most of the book is summary—unfortunately, since Sontag does an excellent job of explaining herself. As an exegesis, though, it's nicely done, and Kennedy traces Sontag's main themes deftly along tortuous paths through both essays and fiction. Her metasubject, Kennedy quotes Sontag as saying, is "what it means to be modern." And then there are her various demi-metasubjects: Sontag exploring extreme states of consciousness, Sontag thinking about artistic isolation, Sontag pondering the ethics of connoisseurship, etc.

Unfortunately, Kennedy writes as though Sontag were dead. He compares her work only to that of her predecessors, with the result that you have little sense, upon finishing the book, of what effect (if any) she is having on younger writers. Her generalism, her polemical essay style, her Europhilia and her political engagement Kennedy links, naturally, to the New York intellectuals: to the generalism of Edmund Wilson, Paul Goodman and Harold Rosenberg, and to the *engagé* literary criticism of Trilling, Philip Rahv and Mary McCarthy. The let's-think-about-me mode she employs in "Trip to Hanoi" and elsewhere he connects to the Mailer-style new journalism of the sixties. Periodically he discusses her in relation to the dead-or-not-dead debate over the public intellectual.

Since Sontag herself spends so much time detailing her relationship to her antecedents, I regret not hearing more about the aspects of her *oeuvre* she *doesn't* talk about. With a publication history as eclectic as hers, her omissions are as telling as her subjects. Why, for instance, after vacuuming up more or less everything written in French in the fifties, from Camus to Barthes to Cioran, did she not write about anyone from the generation that followed? These questions are left hanging.

"My aim," Kennedy states at the outset, "is not to incorporate Sontag into academic frames of thinking." Insofar as that means he's resolved not to use jargon, fair enough, but a dogmatic exclusion of academic reference points seems silly, though certainly Sontagian. One would think it would follow from Kennedy's (and everyone's) conclusion that the public-intellectual tradition has mostly withered away that academic debates are precisely the most interesting ones to include her in these days. Especially the literary-theoretical ones of the seventies and eighties that took up the thread of French thought where Sontag appears to have dropped it.

This is a particularly frustrating omission since Sontag has always been more or less ignored by academia. Kennedy's explanation for this is only somewhat plausible: He claims academics are threatened by her refusal to specialize. Angela McRobbie, a British cultural studies theorist, is more pointed: "In many circles she is viewed with suspicion as at best an elitist, Eurocentric aesthete." McRobbie's view seems to have been borne out by the reception of Sontag's 1989 book, *AIDS and Its Metaphors*. Intruding as she was on a particular academic turf, Sontag suddenly received lots of professorial attention, much of it negative. D.A. Miller wrote a particularly hostile review in which he accused her of homophobia. Much of

what he was reacting to, though, was her perhaps willful ignorance of academic politics: her use of the word "homosexual," for instance, and her aggressive assertion of her right to talk about AIDS with the prefatory sentence, "Rereading *Illness as Metaphor* now, I thought . . ."

Kennedy offers only a few critiques. Boringly, he faults her for restricting her discussion of pornography to the literary variety, thus "bracket[ing] off many of the socio-moral questions central to the pornography debate." Boringly, he reproves her for the cultural elitism that is at the heart of her enterprise. At a very late stage in the book he suddenly comes out as an antimodernist and begins to take Sontag to task for her "perverse, private effort to keep the dead alive." Still, he does defend her against accusations that she has turned to the right, correctly ascribing some of these to a facile equation of her retro universalist rhetoric with neoconservatism.

Shortcomings aside, the mere fact that Kennedy's book exists is interesting. Sontag, as *Partisan Review* editor William Phillips observed in 1969, has always "suffered from bad criticism and good publicity"; she's underrated by the right people and overrated by the wrong people. As a result she is frequently gossiped about but rarely discussed in writing. The only other book-length study of her work—Sohnya Sayres's *Susan Sontag: The Elegiac Modernist* (1990)—is out of print. She's in neither of two recent essay anthologies—Phillip Lopate's *The Art of the Personal Essay* and *The Oxford Book of Essays*.

I would like to read a book that situated Sontag in the present as well as the past, and that analyzed her from the point of view of sensibility—as a writer and appreciator, rather than primarily as a theorist (though of course the two are inextricable). This approach might go some way toward explaining, for one, why her essays are so much better than her novels—why her writing seems too sweet without the salt of information. And it would be an appropriately Sontagian approach, since so much of her writing consists of, as she has put it, "case studies of [her own] evolving sensibility." After all, as she wrote admiringly of fellow-generalist Roland Barthes on his death in 1980, "It was not a question of knowledge . . . but of alertness, a fastidious transcription of what *could* be thought about something, once it swam into the stream of attention." □

The Reluctant Transvestite

WENDY DONIGER

MONSIEUR D'EON IS A WOMAN: A Tale of Political Intrigue and Sexual Masquerade. *By Gary Kates. Basic. 368 pp. $25.*

THE ARABIAN NIGHTS II: Sindbad and Other Popular Stories. *Translated by Husain Haddaway. Norton. 266 pp. $27.50.*

Once upon a time, more precisely on October 5, 1728, a child named Charles-Geneviève-Louis-Auguste-André-Thimothée d'Eon was born to a low-ranking nobleman in the town of Tonnerre in Burgundy. The child grew up to have a distinguished career as a diplomat, a spy and a captain in the dragoons, and was honored with the title of Chevalier for his bravery in the Seven Years' War. In 1770, rumors that he was a woman began to circulate in France and England, and in 1776 Louis XVI officially announced that d'Eon was, and had always been, a woman. The Chevalière, as she now became known, left France and lived the rest of her life as a woman in London. When she died, on May 21, 1810, it was discovered that she was anatomically male.

These "facts" are corroborated by the letters, diaries and official documents of such notable acquaintances of d'Eon as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, Voltaire, Rousseau, Beaumarchais (the author of *The Marriage of Figaro,* who spread the rumor that he and d'Eon were in love and contemplating marriage and who negotiated the document in which Louis XVI announced that d'Eon was a woman), Louis XV and XVI, and the plaintiffs and defendants in a cluster of legal cases in London in 1777 contesting large sums wagered on d'Eon's sex. These documents supply the bare bones of a story that has already fascinated a number of biographers and that takes on new meaning in the contemporary debates about gender and the status of women. Gary Kates, professor of history at Trinity University in Texas, has supplemented the known data with new translations of archival materials and come up with a terrific tale, told with suspense and style and interpreted with wisdom and restraint.

Why did d'Eon do it? Simplistically, one might think that d'Eon's gender transformation had something to do with sex, and certainly that was the opinion of d'Eon's contemporaries; a bit of doggerel published in Paris mocked him for lacking a penis. But whatever he had, what did he do with it? D'Eon himself, in the autobiographical writings that supply the backbone of the evidence, insists that he never slept with anyone, though his notoriety inspired several men to swear that they had been her lover and gave rise to rumors that she had given birth to a boy, or to twins. Kates concludes that "d'Eon emphasized his virginity with such intensity and even pride that although there is no proof, it seems very probable that he was indeed a virgin" and "remained a virgin throughout his life." Kates therefore rules the question of d'Eon's sexual orientation "irrelevant" and argues that he was motivated not by sex but by gender: "D'Eon did not become a woman to trick others; rather, d'Eon chose to become a woman because he deeply admired the moral character of women and wanted to live as one of them."

Cross-dressing to get a job (Tootsie), a Talmudic education (Yentl), access to your kids (Mrs. Doubtfire).

This noble goal was further sustained, Kates argues, by d'Eon's need to flee from the disastrous end of his career in the world of diplomacy, by his abiding interest in early feminist writing (attested by his own writings, including an unfinished history of female religious figures who dressed as men, and by his unique library of feminist literature), by his conversion to a kind of Christian feminism and by the influence of his contemporaries, French aristocrats who were fooling around with gender.

These arguments are presented in solid and profuse detail, but historical context can go only so far; Kates himself admits

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