BOOKS & THE ARTS.

In a Gulf of Her Own

WALTER KENDRICK

A SUSAN SONTAG READER. *By Susan Sontag. Introduction by Elizabeth Hardwick. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 446 pp. $18.50.*

The absence of an American intelligentsia makes Susan Sontag possible. As our unofficial hostess of letters, she has spent more than twenty years introducing us to that exotic creature, the European intellectual. From Washington Irving to Hemingway, American ambivalence toward European culture has been a rich native topic, and Sontag has capitalized on it: she stands midway between the two continents, in what one might call the Sargasso Sea of thought. Her stance there is unique, but always a little shaky.

America's closest approach to an organized intelligentsia is the academic establishment, where ideas do get taken seriously. But ideas are a profession for American academics, and it's bad manners to talk shop at home. Outside the ivied walls, America has thousands of magazines and newspapers that are always talking about something; a few even specialize in thought. But magazine writing, in America, is a profession, too; those who practice it form no intelligentsia of the European kind, and between them and their academic counterparts a great gulf yawns. Sontag inhabits that gulf—not bridging it, but making it her own.

A fully established American figure, Sontag is ready for the archive; and so, appropriately, we have *A Susan Sontag Reader*. It's not *the* Reader—maybe there will be a sequel—but it offers a heavy sampling of her work, from her first novel, *The Benefactor* (1963), through her obituary essay on Roland Barthes (1981), all selected by Sontag herself. Ordinarily, writers are dead or incapacitated before Readers are bestowed on them. Sontag is neither—though you'd never know it from Elizabeth Hardwick's elegiac introduction, which croons of "unique talent" and "profound authority" till you can fairly smell the formaldehyde.

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There's too much of Sontag's fiction here—a harmless gesture of vanity on its author's part, but an unwelcome reminder to the reader of how dull and derivative that fiction is. Several dissertations stand to be written on the multitude of echoes, from Mann and Kafka through Borges and Barthelme, that thud through *The Benefactor*, *Death Kit* and *I, etcetera*. But for a writer whose essays have consistently touted the virtues of "pure, untranslatable, sensuous immediacy" ("Against Interpretation"), Sontag has captured remarkably little of it in her fiction. Vitality flickers here and there in the short pieces from *I, etcetera*, but otherwise her fiction is careful and serious, nothing more.

Her nonfiction, however, is always vivacious, even when its polemic is blurry and its impact has grown blunt with time. Her most famous essays are here—"Against Interpretation," "Notes on 'Camp,'" "The Pornographic Imagination," "Fascinating Fascism"—along with others that are less well known but equally provocative, such as "On Style" and "The Aesthetics of Silence." The last chapter of *On Photography* is included, along with an abridged version of an interview first published in *Salmagundi*. Everything here has been published before, some of it more than once; but now the arrangement is strictly chronological, so that you can follow (or at least look for) signs of development in Sontag's thought.

I couldn't find any, except perhaps the loss of ardency, and gain of serenity, that Hardwick notes in her introduction. But, because the *Reader* is apparently a self-portrait, the absence of a piece can be as revealing as its presence. Many of the short, early pieces from *Against Interpretation* were probably omitted because they are too slight or too closely tied to works and events that appear minor in hindsight. "Trip to Hanoi" might have been passed over for reasons of space, or because it reeks too much of 1968; but I'd rather have had it than *The Benefactor*. Without that troubled, ambivalent attempt to come to terms with herself as a "citizen of the American empire," the *Reader* makes Sontag look much more placidly detached, much more of a nabob, than she in fact has been. But this effect may very well be deliberate.

The total omission of *Illness as Metaphor* is undoubtedly so: even more clearly than *On Photography*, this little book demonstrates Sontag's inability to sustain an extended argument. Her considerable talents as a writer are confined to the fashioning of memorable phrases and elegant sentences; sometimes she can even make a paragraph hang together. But when it comes to a sequence of paragraphs, she slips and slides; and when that sequence must form itself into the larger structures that constitute a coherent book, she collapses. Her best essays are either formless by design, like "Notes on 'Camp,'" or else propped up on the ready-made structure of someone else's film, novel or *oeuvre*.

Her essay on Walter Benjamin ("Under the Sign of Saturn"), for example, is a graceful blending of biography, appreciation and criticism. For Sontag, Benjamin's life and his writing were both shaped by his "Saturnine temperament," and under that rubric she is able to move smoothly back and forth between the man and his work, producing a stylish literary portrait. Her analysis of Godard's films, though written in 1968 and outmoded now, does a fine job of extracting themes and charting continuities. The essay applies conventional methods to unconventional material (a standard tactic of Sontag's); it domesticates Godard, but it does so efficiently and with firm control.

When Sontag's subjects are less clear-cut, however, she habitually starts, stops, starts again and finally loses her way. "Camp" may be such a scatterbrained phenomenon that a shoal of fifty-eight "notes" is an appropriate form for discussing it, but even such an apparently unified essay as "The Pornographic Imagination" moves at the same jerky, uncertain pace. Sontag begins with a dubious distinction between "at least three" kinds of pornography. She then chooses one (the kind with artistic merit) and spends the next thirty pages alternately belaboring and begging the questions raised by her initial distinction. In the process, she offers an excellent analysis of *Story of O*, but when she tries to get beyond its given structure to build her own, she flounders.

Sontag's best writing is impressionistic, and the limits of her thought are those of esthetic impressionism. *On Photography* and *Illness as Metaphor* reveal her limitations most plainly, but they hem in all her work and are more than merely formal. Her "exquisite responsiveness" (Hardwick's phrase) is genuine and often beguiling, but her responses are dictated by a time-worn understanding of the world that is no longer adequate to what the world contains. Sontag's eminence in American letters is disproportionate to the quality of her thought; she perpetuates a tradition of philosophical naiveté that has always kept America subservient to Europe and that surely should have run its course by now.

From the start, Sontag has been haunted by the nervous worry that, in modern culture everywhere, the real thing and its image are getting steadily more involved, and confused, with each other. The menace of photography and metaphorized cancer is the same, for example, as that of Leni Riefenstahl's "documentary" *The Triumph of the Will*: the image, feeding back on the real, pollutes it, so that reality, which should be known in its naked innocence, turns self-conscious, distanced and false.

In the first part of "Fascinating Fascism," Sontag elegantly debunks Riefenstahl's whole career, showing that her postwar defenders have been either naive or dishonest in claiming that Nazism was a forgivable little detour in a beauty-seeker's journey. But the most outrageous thing, for Sontag, is Riefenstahl's claim that in *The Triumph of the Will*, "Everything is genuine. It is *history—pure history*," when, in fact, the 1934 Nuremberg rally that Riefenstahl's film records was deliberately staged to be filmed. It was not an innocent event at which a woman with a camera happened to be present; it was a diseased event, polluted by the awareness that future generations would mistake the imaged for the real. And this, for Sontag, is a graver vice than fascism.

Virtue is exemplified by another German product, Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's *Hitler, A Film from Germany*. Sontag's appreciative analysis, "Syberberg's Hitler," is reprinted here as an apparent companion piece to "Fascinating Fascism." Indeed, there are both good Germans and bad ones; but the most interesting thing about the Syberberg essay is that it commends him chiefly for presenting images as images, hoodwinking neither himself nor his audience by blurring the necessary line between the representation and the real thing. Syberberg calls his film "a continuation of reality by other means," and this, for Sontag, is what all art should be.

When she tracks the strategies of images, Sontag can often be brilliant. When she gets anxious about reality, though, she gets muddled, and the muddle has grown denser in recent years. She remains blind to the paradox that, for her, reality must be full, immediate, alive and in need of no defense; while at the same time images, those pale copies of the real, are capable of draining the

THE LANGUAGE

The language among the clashing winds
and falling trees is action, unexplained
to me or to themselves and unmediated
by feeling for or against—neither
open to discussion with others
nor with themselves. That leaves me
tongue-tied and in a hurry
to secure my safety within
my house, and the trees bend
ominously towards the house
beneath the violence of the wind.

No, it's no use longing
for lyric joy, sorrow or fear. It's
no use longing for words of love
or pleading. It's simply to act
as does the tree or the wind:
to become an agent of that force
that would save my life,
and so I become impersonal to myself.
I lose sight of the mind
that thought all this. It
becomes the mind of the wind.

FOR NOW

How the zebra died in the mouth
of the tigress quickly after a brief struggle
of the legs, and then the herd went back
to feeding off the grass nearby
as the tigress and her cubs knelt
at the body as in worship
and ate their fill.

They were soon quiet and resting
on their full bellies and looking
steadily at the herd feeding itself
with its head down to the grass,
not minding the tigress nor her cubs.

It was a reassuring sight
that there was death
and that it had its place
among the living and a time
and that time had passed
for now.

David Ignatow

real, dulling it and forcing it to call in defenders like Susan Sontag. This blindness has excluded her from all the most interesting developments in Western thought for at least the last fifteen years.

In the early 1960s, when her most controversial essays were written, Sontag might have looked avant-garde; but since then, her constant devotion to the Anglo-American tradition of genteel literary discourse has sorely outmoded her. She seems to know nothing of semiotics, deconstruction, the reinterpretation of Freud, Nietzsche, Hegel and Marx—the true leading edge of the European intelligentsia. Writers like Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva, to mention only a few of the most famous, have already had considerable impact, for both good and ill, on American academic thought. But Academe is hermetic, and the outside world has barely heard of them.

Sontag's only concession to the actual avant-garde has been her appropriation of Roland Barthes. "Writing Itself," her eulogy of him, concludes the *Reader* and is a fine example of Sontag at her most Sontagian. Barthes is an ideal subject for Sontag, because in his late work he seemed to turn away from the scary semiotic radicalism of his middle career, producing a series of gentle, impressionistic books that even Matthew Arnold would have found congenial. In Sontag's hands, Barthes becomes just another sensibility on tour; the essay is heartfelt and touching, but it represses the danger in Barthes and distorts the multifaceted intellectual movement of which he was an important part.

If the *Reader* is in fact Sontag's self-portrait, what she shows us is an unexpectedly conservative, philosophically retrograde writer whose primary function has always been domestication. She introduced American culture to several artists who would have remained obscure much longer without her aid. But in the process she also made them safe, accommodating them to a familiar vocabulary of appreciation and evaluation. That vocabulary has hardly changed since the eighteenth century. When Samuel Johnson spoke of "sensibility," the term meant something definite to him and to his limited, homogeneous audience; when Matthew Arnold used the term, he was already defending the citadel against the noisy rabble; when Sontag uses it, it means nothing except that her unanalyzed preconceptions must at all costs be soothed.

None of this would make any difference if Sontag didn't have such important influence on somebody, somewhere. I must confess, I don't know anyone who looks to Sontag for esthetic guidance. But she takes herself so seriously, and her publisher treats her with such awe, that I can only presume the existence of a vast, anonymous readership, hungry for Sontag's pearls. If these readers exist, their reverence is Sontag's only real achievement—a notable achievement, to be sure, but a far more trenchant criticism of the world of American letters than any essay she ever wrote. □

'I am a Closet of Secrets Dying'

ROBERT B. SHAW

THE LIFE OF JOHN BERRYMAN. *By John Haffenden. Routledge & Kegan Paul. 451 pp. $22.50.*

It is customary for poets' reputations to be revalued downward after their deaths. John Berryman is no exception to the rule: ten years after his suicide, his place among the poets of his time is unsettled. It would be pleasant to believe that John Haffenden's biography will turn the attention of readers back to Berryman's brilliant, problematic works, but the story it tells is so monumentally depressing that it may scare off more readers than it wins for its unruly, ravaged subject.

The Life of John Berryman is an attempt at that intimidating thing, a definitive biography—if accumulation of data can make an account definitive. "I have been partial less to explanation than to information," Haffenden remarks in his introduction; and the pile of facts that follows is something like an African anthill, overblown and teeming and uncomfortable for anyone but ants to be inside. Before detailing my misgivings, I must grant that on a basic level the book is bound to prove essential to students of Berryman. No one is likely to give a more complete version of the often traumatic events of Berryman's childhood and early youth, which reverberated in his writing to the end. Haffenden is equally punctilious in tracing the balance of Berryman's life, and here, too, the sheer mass of information is imposing. What Haffenden has written is in this way less a book than a "source" to be rifled by notecard-shuffling graduate students.

One wonders, however, what those students will make of the peculiar orchestration Haffenden's style gives to his cheerless mass of facts. Although capable of plain, serviceable prose, he is prone to lurch without warning into murky grandiloquence. Referring to the strains that drove Berryman's father to shoot himself, he writes, "Registering an inevitable sense of disengagement, Smith's state of mind rapidly deteriorated." Berryman's maternal grandmother, deserted by her husband, "lived a proud forsakenness for several decades." A colleague of Berryman's, after discovering that the poet had attempted to seduce his wife, followed him home and "traduced him for the affront." (The reader almost feels like translating: "told him off" would do nicely here.)

In the course of defending his preference for information over explanation, Haffenden sniffs at biographers who select facts to fit paradigms: "I have often felt that determinative interpretations of a biography are postulated on the supposition that the dense pattern of a real life should yield to meaning as simple as a rhumb; they sell the reader short by trimming texture to a thesis." As simple as a *what*? I'm all for preserving the texture of whatever life is under discussion, but a biography's *verbal* texture is another matter, and Haffenden's bargain-basement Henry James effects could have been trimmed severely, to the distinct advantage of his narrative.

Once one gets past Haffenden's disinclination to give his material much shape and his breathtaking elevations of diction, the story he tells is an absorbing one. It is also relentlessly disturbing. When Berryman was 12, his father escaped from money worries and an impending divorce by shooting himself beneath his son's bedroom window. "Thereafter," as the poet put it in one

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