The Judgment

For a writer to attempt a book about another writer, it requires nerve, some guild sympathy, and perhaps a dose of narcissistic projection. Also timing: when Ivan Bunin, who knew Chekhov, was asked after the older writer’s death to do a biography of him, he hesitated. He waited almost fifty years, accruing nerve, writing his fiction, winning the Nobel Prize, until, at the brink of his own death, he composed a small book largely made up of questions about Chekhov and the unknowableness of any human being by another.
I cannot wait to win the Nobel Prize. The idea of one writer meditating on another holds enormous appeal for me, because we feed so much on each other’s marrow. So when Princeton University Press, informing me of its intent to start a new series in which one writer would write about another, asked me which author I would choose were I to participate, I thought of Susan Sontag and immediately accepted. Her name popped into my mind because I had been recently mulling over the nature of her achievement and reputation. I had noted the curiously polarized critical responses she seemed to inspire: a tendency while she was alive to treat her with a deference bordering on awe, and, once she had died, to begin to disparage her. I counted myself in the middle: that is, I had always admired her as a writer, had been inspired by her essays particularly, though I often felt divided—loving one passage, not able to accept another—and this ambivalence struck me as a promising basis for a work of literary reflection. Had I chosen some writer whom I purely adulated, such as Montaigne or Hazlitt, I not only would have had to write on my knees, an awkward position, but I sensed I might have run out of things to say. My mixed feelings about Sontag would keep me indefinitely engaged. I could “stage” my ambiva-
lence, and work through it to some resolution—or at least come to understand my own thought processes better, the customary work of an essay. If, as it has turned out, I sometimes seemed to be taking back with one hand what I’d given with another, the objectives I’ve tried to hold in mind are balance, fairness, and honesty. Those who are looking for a hatchet-job here will be as disappointed as those seeking hagiography.

The goal of objectivity has been complicated by the fact that I knew Susan Sontag, however slightly, over the years. We were acquaintances, never forming either a friendship or an enmity. The professional life of a mid-list writer is likely to be punctuated from time to time by encounters with literary luminaries who are far more famous and celebrated, providing rich occasions for gratitude, resentment, or amusing memoir fodder, as the case may be. I would like to think that my encounters with the subject of this book have not unduly colored my opinions of her written work. My decision to write about these encounters—that is, to introduce the word “I” into what is otherwise largely a work of criticism, which may strike some as unseemly—has to do with the fact that I am trained as a personal essayist, but also because I can’t help hoping that by showing the way Susan Sontag responded to situations in the
real world, it will bring some light to her persona on the page.

Of course the person one met in social situations and on the page were two different entities. She herself was quite conscious of this disparity, as when she wrote in an unusually self-analytical essay, “Singleness” (1995):

Sometimes I feel I’m in flight from the books, and the twaddle they generate. . . . Oppressed by as well as reluctantly proud of this lengthening mini-shelf of work signed by Susan Sontag, pained to distinguish myself (I was a seeker) from her (she had merely found), I flinched at everything written about her, the praise as much as the pans. . . (that congeries of misunderstandings and stereotypes that make up one’s reputation or fame). I’m not that image (in the minds of other people), it declares. And, with more poignancy, don’t punish me for being what you call successful. I’ve got this onerous charge, this work-obsessed, ambitious writer who bears the same name as I do. I’m just me, accompanying, administering, tending to that one, so she can get some work done. (wsp, 260–61)

The problem with this plea was that she was not just a writer but a cultural celebrity, much-
photographed, conjuring up instantly in the public’s mind a certain physical form as well as an aura of mind, and that she herself had done much to shape, refine, and control that image of herself and cause it to proliferate. She needed attention, sought it, yet was shy at receiving it, feeling misunderstood—sometimes undervalued, sometimes overvalued, as if she had put one over on us. “My one perennial form of self-flattery: I know better than anyone what she is about, and nobody is as severe a judge of her work as I am myself” (wsf, 260).

One of the things that fascinates me about Sontag was her adapting one literary mask after another—the art critic, the polemical social policy advocate, the playfully wicked novelist, the war correspondent, and so forth—to express the full variety of her personality, all the while insisting on a rigid division between her self and her work. As she phrased it, “my books are not a means of discovering who I am, either; I’ve never fancied the ideology of writing as therapy or self-expression.” (Interestingly, she did not always think so. In a 1961 diary entry she stated: "I write to define myself—an act of self-creation—part of the process of becoming—in a dialogue with writers I admire living and dead, with ideal readers.”) However much she may have come to dis-
dian the idea, inevitably her writing did become a means of self-discovery, possibly even self-healing, certainly self-consolation. In any case, here I am, a so-called authority on the personal essay, ruminating on someone who eschewed such personal essay writing, or did it only despite herself and usually through the medium of criticism. She was fiercely conscious of her uniqueness, convinced from the age of 3 or 4 that she was a genius, and kept searching for her peers or betters, dead or alive, to help convey those qualities, however much she came to deplore the vulgari-
ties of self-expression. I want to trace here how she came to put forth the complicated identity of “Susan Sontag” over the course of her books, how she created this part-intentional, part-inadvertent persona, and to some extent became a prisoner of it, while at other times she was able to slip the knot of our expectations and augment her world-
lines. The larger story is how any writer, starting with a range of interests and potentialities, comes, through variable deployment of those talents, to arrive at the patterns which delineate her achieve-
ments and limitations—her artistic fate.

Sontag was, like all of us, a creature of her times. She was also one of our foremost interpreters of the period through which she lived, our recent contemporary moment. In writing about her, I
have found myself reliving with excitement and rue the same forty-plus years, and questioning the implicit assumptions that overhung these decades. What I am trying to say is that this book is not just my journey into Sontag-land, but my attempt to understand the slice of history we both shared.

One of Sontag’s favorite structural devices was to organize her reflections around a set of notes. It was a technique that honored modernism’s fragmentation and its modest disavowal of grand resolution. So I have taken her lead, and offer these “notes” on a fascinating literary figure. To be sure, while patterns are suggested, there is no single governing thesis that I am putting forth here, so don’t bother looking for one. Instead, I have allowed myself the freedom to follow my nose, tracking some of Sontag’s characteristic qualities, strategies, influences, enthusiasms, pet dislikes, and contradictions in an essayistic circling from different perspectives. By taking soundings, sometimes from a chronological, sometimes a thematic, sometimes a genre-oriented, sometimes a personal vantage-point, it is my hope that each will reinforce the others.

According to Georg Lukacs, “The essay is a judgment, but the essential, the value-determining thing about it is not the verdict (as is the case with the
system) but the process of judging.” Interestingly, Sontag once wrote a cryptic diary entry to herself: “The greatest crime: to judge.” While I intend in this book to take the reader through my own meandering process of judging Susan Sontag, perhaps it would be best to get the overall “verdict” out of the way first, to dispense with any false suspense.

Sontag’s first three essay collections—Against Interpretation, Styles of Radical Will, Under the Sign of Saturn—constitute, to my mind, some of the enduring glories of American literary nonfiction. The brief I would make for them has nothing to do with whether her own opinions have stood up, but with the belief that her shorter essays are powerful constructions, eloquently argued, well-illustrated, often elegantly structured, and dense with suggestive, stimulating thought.

What is especially exhilarating about the essays in these first three collections is to be in the presence of her conviction. Whether you agree with her opinions scarcely matters; sometimes they are even more stimulating when you disagree, because she means to provoke. Part of their charm is that they gave us an exciting portrait of a new kind of woman: independent, open to pleasure, unencumbered by apologetic defensiveness about her intelligence.
Her diaries show that this conviction was partly a willed technique, a form of play-acting. In an entry dated Feb. 22, 1967, 3 a.m., she wrote: “I’m finishing the [‘Story of O’] review which has turned into a 35-page essay. It’s ok. Still, I don’t believe a word I’m saying. It’s interesting, maybe valuable—but I don’t see how ‘true’” (NYTM).

Her fiction is, in the main, poor. Maybe that’s too harsh: her fiction is, for the most part, unsuccessful—the only exceptions being one novel, The Volcano Lover, which is lively and decent, and a few experimental short stories (such as “Unguided Tour” and “The Way We Live Now”). She lacked broad sympathy and a sense of humor, which are usually prerequisites for good fiction. More germane, perhaps, she did not convincingly command a fictive space on the page; her fiction seemed derivative, forced, studied; she was not a natural at staging and nurturing conflict, and would either shy away from plot or force it into melodrama. (Her films, with the exception of Promised Lands, have the same derivative, labored, unconvincing quality.) But what an essayist!

Is it comic or tragic, the way she came to undervalue her essay writing and insist she be honored for her novels, like the clown wanting to play Hamlet? Once, the Israeli writer David
Grossman approached her to say how much her essays had meant to him. “Bah! Have you read my *Volcano*?” She became touchy when people complimented her essays. Even in retrospect, when she wrote of the period that she composed the essays in *Against Interpretation*, she would only frame that time as the interval between her first novel and her second—a distraction from fiction. I, who revere the art of essay writing, and who can never regard literary nonfiction as even a fraction inferior to fiction, find puzzling Son-tag’s need to be thought primarily a novelist. But not unusual: postwar American writing featured a number of writers arguably better at nonfiction who preferred to be thought of as novelists: James Baldwin, Mary McCarthy, Gore Vidal, Norman Mailer, Truman Capote. Novels were considered the Big Game, essays the minor pursuit. In Son-tag’s case, there was more involved than status; there was something valiant about her need to reinvent herself. She had already succeeded as an essayist, and seemed to feel she had used up the problems of the form (or so she puts it in her foreword to a reissued edition of *Against Interpretation*).

Her fourth essay collection, *Where the Stress Falls*, may be too compendious, unfocused, a catch-all for her vagrant interests. Even so, it has
remarkable pieces in it: the essays on Machado de Assis, Roland Barthes, and Robert Walser; the personal essays on travel; and her pieces on the choreographers George Balanchine, Merce Cunningham, and Lucinda Childs. Sontag wrote beautifully and knowledgeably about dance, which for her was a utopia of order and rapture, adhering to the highest standards of perfection, the consummate expression of her longing for “transparency.” Overall, the overstuffed Where the Stress Falls is much underrated. Perhaps because she had already made such a point of wanting to be considered a novelist, the literary world took her too much at her word.

Her last, posthumous essay collection, At the Same Time, is her weakest. Her religion, in the end, came to be Literature. Certainly a worthy shrine, but the piety of these late essays is wearisome, as is the generality of her praise for literature, and her scolding stance that she is one of the last persons on earth who still loves books.

The declining quality of Sontag’s late essays can be explained by a number of factors: illness may have taken their toll on her energy; she had transferred even more of her creative ambition to fiction writing, leaving essays an afterthought; the success of her earlier essays made it harder to top them—she would either need to reinvent
the form, or coast; she had grown alienated from
the dominant culture, no longer in step with its
mood, and thus the pieces grew crabber, exasper-
ated, took on their scolding tone. Many later
essays were prompted by occasions or the promise
of a quick buck, as happens to all successful writ-
ers who become sought-after to write introduc-
tions to coffee table books, give award-winning
speeches, present papers at international confer-
ences—her article prose became more oral, more
user-friendly, as well as more platitudinous and
slack.

But, in fact, Sontag was never a consistent
prose stylist. Some of her sentences are elegantly
turned, others are clumsy and clotted. The incons-
sistency might have to do with the succession of
masks she tried on, or with the variety of audi-
cences she addressed. Always a hard worker,
always in love with beauty, she herself did not
have that automatic grace that certain writers of
the highest order possess.

Her book-length essay projects—On Photog-
raphy, Illness as Metaphor, AIDS as Metaphor,
Regarding the Pain of Others—brought her a
greater measure of popularity and renown. Pas-
sionately voiced, important books, which by her
intellectual prestige alone turned the spotlight
on the subjects they covered, they also seem to
me attenuated, their arguments stretched to stridency, their initial promise left unrealized. Sontag was an aphoristic, compressed writer, and so it should be no surprise that she was at her best in shorter essays. She would weigh in, marching ahead with determination and force. By the end of twenty-five pages she had nailed it. When she spread out to the length of a book, the provocative, perverse nature of her arguments tended to fall apart. Once you had assimilated the moving, reasonable point that patients should not be victimized for their illnesses, there was nowhere else for Illness as Metaphor to go; the perverse, unreasonable part, which alleged that metaphors were bad for you, could never be wholly convincing, since the mind cannot work unmetaphorically. Of course her own prose in On Photography was wildly metaphorical: the camera was a gun, an instrument of violation, et cetera, and that indicting posture led to similar exaggerations.

Sontag did not, in the main, practice “thinking against oneself,” as the Romanian essayist E. M. Cioran (about whom she wrote an admiring essay) recommended. She would customarily take a stand, charge in ferociously and at times sanctimoniously. She would not argue with herself within the borders of the essay, as many great essayists do; rather, she would take issue
with herself in another, later piece of writing. Thus, “Fascinating Fascism” corrects her earlier defense of Leni Riefenstahl, and the straightforward humanism of Regarding the Pain of Others amends the prosecutorial zeal of On Photography, and “Questions of Travel,” her essay on group jaunts to communist countries, administers a rebuke to her earlier naïveté in Trip to Hanoi.

In her posthumous collection of essays and speeches, At the Same Time, she often gave lip service to literature’s need for skepticism and paradox, and claimed that “a good deal of my life has been devoted to trying to demystify ways of thinking that polarize and oppose” (ATST, 203). Actually, her demystifying was often in the service of opposition and polarization (though decades later she might occupy the opposite pole, equally forthrightly). There were a few times, however, when the poles of her ambivalence were allowed to stand inside the same text. Part of the allure of her most influential essay, “Notes on Camp,” came from its ability to sustain an ambivalent, unresolved tone throughout. It is also her most purely aphoristic.

Sontag was the master of the aphoristic essay. She had the aphorist’s disdain for qualifiers, such as “perhaps” or “occasionally,” which might mar the sleekness of the quivering-arrow sentence
hitting the bull’s-eye. Here is how she wrote of the technique: “Most of the great aphorists have been pessimists, purveyors of scorn for human folly. . . . Aphoristic thinking is informal, unsociable, adversarial, proudly selfish” (USS, 191). In her hands, the blade cut both ways: her aphorisms could delight, but sometimes they came off as glib and did their author damage: for instance, “communism is Fascism with a human face.”

She is often taken to task—and unfairly, I think—for having contradicted herself on certain matters, especially politics. I say “unfairly” because it can be a sign of growth and openness to change one’s opinions. No, what is problematic is not that she contradicted herself over time, as everyone must, but that she kept taking strident, doctrinaire-sounding positions that did not seem to allow for the possibility that there were other, legitimate ways of thinking about the same topic—or the self-knowledge that she herself might come to them eventually. She was an enthusiast—a lover, not a skeptic—who needed to fall hard for a position and convince herself it was the only one.

“I am not at all interested in writing about work I don’t admire,” she told her Paris Review interviewer, Edward Hirsch. “And even among what I’ve admired, by and large I’ve only writ-
ten about things I felt were neglected or relatively unknown. I am not a critic, which is something else than an essayist.” Of course Sontag is a critic, and a valuable one, as well as an essayist; I take that last statement with a grain of salt. But she is following Auden (also a brilliant critic) in saying that life is too short to waste time reviewing books one doesn’t think are any good. She is not a gate-keeper, turning away bad art. She is an enthusiast, calling our attention to the neglected gems we probably haven’t noticed. When asked to name her favorite writer, she answered “Shakespeare,” but since, as she explained, she felt she had nothing compelling or original to say about him, she did not bother to praise him in print.

In writing about those she admired, she may also have been establishing a literary lineage—to conclude in her. Nothing unusual about that: authors frequently cobble together, from their ancestors or contemporaries, a club of kindred spirits, in order to instruct the public how they wish to be considered. As she herself said, in her essay about Elias Canetti, who had paid a beautiful tribute to Herman Broch: “Such a tribute creates the terms of succession. When Canetti finds in Broch the necessary attributes of a great writer—he is original; he sums up his age; he opposes his age—he is delineating the standards
to which he has pledged himself” (uss, 181). In her case, most of her standards and models were French and German.

She had a noisy quarrel with America. Yet she herself was very American: in her gift for self-invention; in her candor; in her dynamic, athletic recklessness; in her belief that hard work could transcend one’s limitations. “Poor Susan,” Barthes once told a friend of mine, Carlos Clarens. “She rows, she rows. . .” Meaning, I suppose: She tries so hard but she’ll always lack that certain insouciant brilliance, such as he, her idol, had. In Barthes’s disloyal, behind-the-back remark (she was ever loyal to him; he would greet her with “Ah Susan, toujours fidèle”), there was something of the European intellectual administering a rebuke to the dogged upstart American. Sontag herself said positively, using the very same metaphor: “Writing is, finally, a series of permissions you give yourself to be expressive in certain ways. . . . Allowing yourself, when you dare think it’s going well (or not too badly), simply to keep rowing along” (wsf, 264).

Sontag insisted she was never bored. Even if true, she could get mighty impatient, which condition resembles boredom. She had an unequivocal disdain for the academy, insisting that it destroyed writers’ souls (a view I would like to believe too
sweeping). But she always kept up to date with literary theory, and her writing constantly signaled to academic readers that she was in dialogue with them. She managed to have it both ways: to embed shards of academic theory into her text, and to write clearly for a general public.

She often cultivated an elusive style, so that the general public had to run after her meaning with its tongue out, feeling stupid. She was both a popularizer and an obscurantist. She could be extremely direct, as any polemicist must; but she could also be opaque and hard to pin down, with her mastery of the impersonal mode. She was, for decades, the single most important bridge between intellectuals and the public. She also made a significant part of her living giving readings and lectures in short visits to universities. What was her beef, then, with academia? That it was populated with mediocrities, bores, overeager to win her approval? She loved parties, but academia was the wrong party.

She was a snob. To play the snob in American culture, with its chronic lip service to egalitarianism or leveling envy, is a tough act, and potentially a useful one. Sontag was snobbish the way certain star writers from the provinces are, who never lose the feeling of insecurity about their right to be seated on the dais, or their need to be
so. For Sontag, there was an A-list and a Z-list and nothing in between. If you were not on the A list you were on the Z list, or the un-list, simple as that. Originally from Arizona and California, she was one of those Girls of the Golden West (along with Mary McCarthy, Pauline Kael, Joan Didion) who came east to New York, sometimes with a chip on their shoulders, to claim their spotlight.

She was courageous. She followed her son David to the battlefield of Savajevo. In intellectual battles, she was perfectly willing to take on conventional wisdom and make enemies. Yet it must be said that she was always positioning herself according to how she would be perceived by her peers or betters on the international stage; the need to be thought well of by the right people was apparently critical.

In writing this book I have come to realize, sometimes uncomfortably, how much I have in common with my subject. I, too, have a habit of boasting, and a need to maneuver any situation so as to put myself in a superior light. I, too, get quickly impatient with ordinary chatter, tend to be detached, am something of a snob in aesthetic matters, and cherish the exquisite, neglected artwork. I, too, write essays and fiction, and am known more for the former than the latter
(though, to me, that judgment seems entirely apt). It is a truism that we have a hard time tolerating in others the defects that reside in ourselves. I say all this by way of warning the reader to be armed with skepticism and argumentativeness for what follows. Mine is not meant to be the final word on this distinguished subject.

This book is not a biography (thank God), so I have not felt obliged to interview any relatives or close friends. What I have done, consistently, is to interrogate my own thoughts and feelings about Sontag. I view the result as primarily a conversation between two authors. Granted, one of them does not get to reply, but she had more than her say when she was alive. Eloquent as she was, I have had all I can do to hold up my end of the conversation. Whatever my reservations about Sontag may be, I notice that I am always talking to her in my head, she is always provoking me to think harder, her work stimulates me to reply, and that has made writing the book a joy. I would be less than honest if I did not admit that it also induced a fear that I would be punished for my hubris in taking the measure of such an intellectual icon. But I always had at hand the model of Sontag herself, the enthusiastic generalist who was unafraid to tackle any subject—and that has given me heart to persist.