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The new sensibility

by Roger Kimball

The sixth in a series titled "Reflections on a cultural revolution."

Everyone who feels bored cries out for change. With this demand I am in complete sympathy, but it is necessary to act in accordance with some settled principle. . . . Nil admirari [nothing is to be marveled at] is . . . the real philosophy. No moment must be permitted so great a significance that it cannot be forgotten when convenient; each moment ought, however, to have so much significance that it can be recollected at will. . . . From the beginning one should keep the enjoyment under control, never spreading every sail to the wind in any resolve; one ought to devote oneself to pleasure with a certain suspicion, a certain wariness, if one desires to give the lie to the proverb which says that no one can eat his cake and have it too.

—Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*

Like all great aesthetes, Barthes was an expert at having it both ways.

—Susan Sontag, "On Roland Barthes"

In an earlier installment of these reflections, we noted that America's cultural revolution, despite the insurrectionary rhetoric that accompanied it, differed in important ways from political revolutions as traditionally understood. To be sure, the endless demonstrations, sit-ins, rallies, petitions, marches, and "non-negotiable demands" that were such a prominent feature of the 1960s and 1970s had myriad political ramifications. Everything that has come under the Orwellian rubric of "affirmative action" is a case in point. Nevertheless, the result of the counterculture's political activism was not to overthrow a government but to transform morals—using "morals" broadly, as Matthew Arnold did in his famous essay on Wordsworth, to encompass "whatever bears upon the question, 'how to live.'"

There are other distinctions to be observed. For if America's cultural revolution must be distinguished on one side from genuine political revolution, so it must be distinguished on another side from a genuine intellectual or artistic revolution. Of course, talk about "innovation," "creativity," and a new "avant-garde" was deafening in the 1960s and 1970s. But looking back on that period—and looking around now at its sordid aftermath—one is left mostly with the embarrassing sensation of hyperactive sterility. What was all the sound and fury about? What did that putative unleashing of "creativity" create? It is as if an entire generation had somehow conspired to infantilize itself, substituting overblown intellectual impersonation for serious cultural endeavor. When one compares it to the last truly important era of artistic and cultural innovation—the era of high modernism, which culminated in the 1920s—one is struck above all by the extent to which the "radical" artistic and intellectual gestures of the counterculture were unwitting repetitions or jejune parodies of ideas that had seemed old before World War II.

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Partly, no doubt, what we saw in the Sixties was a venerable case of history repeating itself as farce. But if its combination of vacuousness, self-infatuation, and political grandstanding seems mostly preposterous now, that should not lead us to underestimate its destructive effects. America's cultural revolution was not itself an intellectual or artistic revolution; but it nevertheless has had immense consequences for artistic and intellectual life. It is not simply that there has been a disastrous lowering of standards. There has also been a wholesale attack on the very idea of standards: a process of blurring or (more accurately) inversion that has made critical discrimination seem like an antiquarian pursuit. What we have witnessed is a corruption of taste that is at the same time the triumph of a certain species of aestheticizing decadence.

No one has more lovingly delineated, or more perfectly epitomized, the mandarin ambiguities of this situation than Susan Sontag, the critic, novelist, playwright, filmmaker, theatrical director, professional aesthete, and political radical. Sontag burst upon the New York intellectual scene in the mid Sixties with a handful of remarkable essays: "Notes on 'Camp'" (1964) and "On Style" (1965) in *Partisan Review*; "Against Interpretation" (1964) in *Evergreen Review*; "One Culture and the New Sensibility" (1965), an abridged version of which first appeared in *Mademoiselle*; and several essays and reviews in the newly launched *New York Review of Books*. (Sontag contributed a short review of Simone Weil's essays for the *Review's* inaugural issue in 1963.) Almost overnight, it seemed, these essays electrified intellectual debate and catapulted their author to celebrity.

Not that Sontag's efforts were unanimously praised. Far from it. The critic John Simon, to take just one example, wondered in a sharp letter to *Partisan Review* whether Sontag's "Notes on 'Camp'" was itself "only a piece of 'camp.'" No, the important thing was the *attentiveness* of the response. Pro or con, Sontag's essays galvanized debate: indeed, they contributed mightily to changing the very climate of intellectual debate. Her demand, at the end of "Against Interpretation," that "in place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art"; her praise of camp, the "whole point" of which "is to dethrone the serious"; her encomium to the "new sensibility" of the Sixties, whose acolytes, she observed, "have broken, whether they know it or not, with the Matthew Arnold notion of culture, finding it historically and humanly obsolescent": in these and other such pronouncements Sontag offered not arguments but a mood, a tone, an atmosphere.

Never mind that a lot of it was mere verbiage: it was nevertheless *irresistible* verbiage. It somehow didn't matter, for example, that the whole notion of "an erotics of art" was arrant nonsense. Everyone likes sex, and talking about "erotics" seems so much sexier than talking about "sex"; and of course everyone likes art: how was it that no one had thought of putting them together in this clever way before? Who would bother with something so boring as mere "interpretation" — which, Sontag had suggested, was these days "reactionary, impertinent, cowardly, stifling," "the revenge of the intellect upon art" — when he could have (or pretend to have) an erotics instead?

It was a remarkable performance, all the more so as Sontag was then barely thirty years old. In truth, there had always been something precocious — not to say hasty — about her. Born in New York City in 1933, she had been brought up mostly in Arizona and California (her father died in 1938; Sontag is her stepfather's name). She began skipping grades when she was six. Graduating from high school when she was barely sixteen, Sontag went first to the University of California at Berkeley and then, in the fall of 1949, to the University of Chicago. In December of 1950, when she was seventeen, she met the critic Philip Rieff (author of *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* [1966], among other works), then a twenty-eight-year-old instructor, who was giving a course that Sontag audited. As she was leaving after the first class, Sontag recalled, "He was standing at the door and he grabbed my arm and asked my name. I apologized and told him I had only come to audit. 'No, what's your name?' he persisted. 'Will you have lunch with me.'" Married ten days later, they found themselves with a son — who would grow up to be the left-wing writer David Rieff — in 1952 and a divorce in 1958. Meanwhile Sontag, having picked up a bachelor's degree at Chicago after three years, had also spent time studying at Harvard — where she took a master's degree in philosophy — and at Oxford and the Sorbonne. Armed with a battery of French names few people knew about here, she returned to New York in 1959, worked briefly at *Commentary* and elsewhere before taking up, in 1960, a teaching position at Columbia in (*mirabile dictu*) the department of religion.

But all this was prolegomenon. Looking back on it now, it seems obvious that throughout those years Sontag was constructing, burnishing, perfecting — what to call it? A style, partly;

a tone, assuredly; but in the end, perhaps, it might be best described as an altitude. By the time she began publishing in highbrow journals like *Partisan Review*, Sontag had made herself the mistress of a new brand of cultural hauteur. It was ferociously intellectual without necessarily being intelligent; it deployed, but did not rely upon, arguments. Its invariable direction was *de haut en bas*. “Formal” and “formalist” are among Sontag’s favorite words. In her early essays, she never tires of telling us that works of art must be judged for their formal properties, not their “content.” If we judge Sontag’s own essays in “formal” terms, they may appear as models of chic daring; but judged in terms of content, they are little more than a repository of intellectual clichés—witness the insistence, as if it were something original, on judging art for its formal excellence and not its “message,” one of the hoariest of modern half-truths. “The satisfactions of *Paradise Lost*,” she writes in “On Style,” do not lie in its views on God and man, but in the superior kinds of energy, vitality, expressiveness which are incarnated in the poem.” What she doesn’t say is that the energy, vitality, and expressiveness of Milton’s poem are unintelligible apart from the truths it aspires to articulate. If this were not the case, *Paradise Lost* might just as well be about baked beans as about “justify[ing] the ways of God to man.”

It goes without saying that what we are dealing with here is only partly a matter of *intellectual* style. Sontag was creating a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and it had sartorial as well as cerebral leitmotifs. We get a hint of this in the introduction to *Conversations with Susan Sontag*, a collection of interviews published in 1995. The editor of that volume quotes a description of an author’s photograph depicting Sontag “in black trousers, black polo-neck and wearing cowboy boots. She is stretched out on a windowsill with a pile of books and papers under her arm. The seriousness is lightened by the faint flicker of pleasure: this is an image which pleases the author. At home, with books, wearing black.” It is not said whether this was before or after the publication of *Texas Boots*, David Rieff’s celebration of cowboy boots. In any event, it is clear that a less physically attractive woman could never have aspired to be Susan Sontag.

It is hardly surprising that one of Sontag’s indisputable contributions has been to the art of pretension—or perhaps it should be called “intellectual impersonation.” It is not every day, for example, that a writer, asked when his interest in “the moral” began, will reply as did Sontag that

I believe that it began when I was three years old. In other aspects, I am not very clear about when I was young, which is a source of strength and a problem at the same time. I remember that I would think much on the things that I think about now before I was ten years old.

It is almost enough to make one join Sontag in her campaign against interpretation.

In one early essay, Sontag described the bombastic dramatic events known as “happenings” as “an art of radical juxtaposition.” The same can be said of her essays, singly and taken in comparison with one another. What she produces are not essays, really, but verbal collages. *Against Interpretation* (1966), her first collection, contains pieces on Sartre and science fiction novels, the literary criticism of the Marxist Georg Lukács and a paean to Jack Smith’s *Flaming Creatures*, a cult film in which, as Sontag cheerfully puts it, “a couple of women and a much larger number of men, most of them clad in flamboyant thrift-shop women’s clothes, frolic about, pose and posture, dance with one another, and enact various scenes of voluptuousness, sexual frenzy, romance, and vampirism,” including scenes of masturbation, gang rape, and oral sex. Sontag castigates the “indifference or hostility” of “the mature intellectual and artistic community” to this “small but valuable work” in the tradition of “the cinema of shock.” She praises the “extraordinary charge and beauty of [Smith’s] images” and—a signature Sontag touch—the film’s “exhilarating freedom from moralism.” Sontag is very big on that “exhilarating freedom from moralism.” Acknowledging that “by ordinary standards”—but not, of course, by hers—*Flaming Creatures* is composed of themes that are “perverse, decadent,” she insists that really the film “is about joy and innocence,” not least because it is “both too full of pathos and too ingenuous to be prurient.”

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This sort of thing was catnip to the intellectual establishment of the mid 1960s. Not that any of it was new, exactly. *Nostalgie de la boue* has long been a defining disease of bourgeois intellectuals, and has been effectively peddled by many before the advent of S. Sontag. But few if any writers commanded Sontag’s air of perfect knowingness, which managed to combine commendation, indifference, and disdain with breathtaking virtuosity.

In his review of *Under the Sign of Saturn*, a collection of Sontag's essays published in 1982, John Simon noted that "nothing succeeds better than highbrow endorsement of lowbrow tastes." Sontag's great trick was not merely to endorse lowbrow tastes, but to create the illusion that for the truly sophisticated all intellectual, artistic, and moral distinctions of merit were otiose, dispensable, *de trop*. This is one reason that she championed the camp sensibility. "Camp," she observed, "is the consistently aesthetic experience of the world. It incarnates a victory of 'style' over 'content,' 'aesthetics' over 'morality,' of irony over tragedy." Camp, she went on to say, "is a solvent of morality," concluding with one of her famous paradoxes: "The ultimate Camp statement: it's good *because* it's awful." (She immediately adds: "of course, one can't always say that. Only under certain conditions" — thus letting you know that not just anyone is allowed to indulge in contradiction and win praise for it.)

One of Sontag's characteristic productions was "The Pornographic Imagination" (1967), which appears in *Styles of Radical Will* (1969), her second collection. In essence, it is a defense of pornography, not, of course, as something merely salacious—that would grant too much recognition of its "content"—but for its "formal" resources as a means of transcendence. It is hardly news that sexual ecstasy has often poached on religious rhetoric and vice versa; nor is it news that pornography often employs religious metaphors. That is part of its perversity. But Sontag decides to take pornography seriously as a solution to the spiritual desolations of modern secular culture. Writing about Pauline Réage's pornographic *Story of O*, she solemnly tells us that

O is an adept; whatever the cost in pain and fear, she is grateful for the opportunity to be initiated into a mystery. That mystery is the loss of self. O learns, she suffers, she changes. Step by step she becomes more what she is, a process identical with the emptying out of herself. In the vision of the world presented by *The Story of O*, the highest good is the transcendence of personality.

Which is about as accurate as saying that the Marquis de Sade's books are essentially about exercise.

One of Sontag's great gifts has been her ability to enlist her politics in the service of her aestheticism. For her, it is the work of a moment to move from admiring pornography—or at least "the pornographic imagination"—to castigating

the traumatic failure of capitalist society to provide authentic outlets for the perennial human flair for high-temperature visionary obsession, to satisfy the appetite for exalted self-transcending modes of concentration and seriousness. The need of human beings to transcend "the person" is no less profound than the need to be a person, an individual.

“The Pornographic Imagination,” like most of Sontag’s essays, is full of powerful phrases, seductive insights, and extraordinary balderdash. Sontag dilates on pornography’s “peculiar access to some truth.” What she doesn’t say is that *The Story of O* (for example) presents not an instance of mystical fulfillment but a graphic depiction of human degradation. Only someone who had allowed “form” to triumph over “content” could have ignored this. In a way, “The Pornographic Imagination” is itself the perfect camp gesture: for if camp aims to “dethrone the serious” it is also, as Sontag points out, “deadly serious” about the demotic and the trivial. Sontag is a master at both ploys. Having immersed herself in the rhetoric of traditional humanistic learning, she is expert at using it against itself. This of course is a large part of what has made her writing so successful among would-be “avant-garde” intellectuals: playing with the empty forms of traditional moral and aesthetic thought, she is able to appear simultaneously unsettling and edifying, daringly “beyond good and evil” and yet passionately *engagé*.

“The Pornographic Imagination” also exhibits the seductive Sontag hauteur in full flower. After telling us that pornography can be an exciting version of personal transcendence, she immediately remarks that “not everyone is in the same condition as knowers or potential knowers. Perhaps most people don’t need ‘a wider scale of experience.’ It may be that, without subtle and extensive psychic preparation, any widening of experience and consciousness is destructive for most people.” Not for you and me, Dear Reader: we are among the elect. We deserve that “wider scale of experience”; but as for the rest, as for “most people,” well. . . .

It doesn’t always work. As a writer, Sontag is essentially a coiner of epigrams. At their best they are witty, well phrased, provocative. A few are even true: “Nietzsche was a histrionic thinker but not a lover of the histrionic.” But Sontag’s striving for effect (unlike Nietzsche, she is a lover of the histrionic) often leads her into muddle. In “One Culture and the New Sensibility,” for example, she enthusiastically reasons that “if art is understood as a form of discipline of the feelings and a programming of sensations, then the feeling (or sensation) given off by a Rauschenberg painting might be like that of a song by the Supremes.” But of course the idea that art is a “programming of the sensations” (a phrase, alas, of which Sontag is particularly fond) is wrong, incoherent, or both, as is the idea that feelings or sensations might be “given off” by any song or painting, even one by Rauschenberg (odors, yes; sensations, no). As often happens, her passion for synesthesia and effacing boundaries leads her into nonsense.

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Charity dictates that we pass lightly over Sontag's fiction and drama. Most of it reminds one of Woody Allen's parody of Kafka. "Should I marry K.? Only if she tells me the other letters of her name" — that sort of thing. Here's a sample from *I, etcetera* (a book whose title might be reused for Sontag's collected works): "Dearest M. I cannot telephone. I am six years old. My grief falls like snowflakes on the warm soil of your indifference. You are inhaling your own pain." Readers looking for the comic side of Sontag's *oeuvre* will want to dip into her fiction: *The Benefactor* (1963) and *Death Kit* (1967) are particularly fine, provided they are read as parodies of intellectual solemnity. In *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard advised the aspiring aesthete to look for "a very different kind of enjoyment from that which the author has been so kind as to plan for you." It is advice that is particularly relevant when approaching Sontag's "creative writing."

If one wanted to sum up Sontag's allure in a single phrase, it would be difficult to do better than Tom Wolfe's "radical chic." In her manner, her opinions, her politics, Sontag has always been a walking inventory of radical chic attitudes. Writing about Camus's notebooks in 1963, she naturally patronizes him as having been "acclaimed beyond his purely literary merits," assuring us that, unlike Sartre (but like George Orwell), he was not "a thinker of importance." In 1963, Jean-Paul Sartre was still an Approved Radical Figure, whose Communist sympathies and virulent anti-Americanism made him beloved of American intellectuals. Camus, who had had the temerity to criticize Communism, was distinctly not-ARF and had to be taken down a peg or two.

And then there were Sontag's own political activities. Cuba and North Vietnam in 1968, China in 1973, Sarajevo in 1993 (where she went to direct a production of *Waiting for Godot*—surely the consummate radical chic gesture of all time). Few people have managed to combine naïve idealization of foreign tyranny with violent hatred of their own country to such deplorable effect. Consider her essay "Some Thoughts on the Right Way (for us) to Love the Cuban Revolution," which appeared in *Ramparts* magazine in April 1969. She begins with some ritualistic denunciations of American culture as "inorganic, dead, coercive, authoritarian." "America is a cancerous society with a runaway rate of productivity that inundates the country with increasingly unnecessary commodities, services, gadgets, images, information." One of the few spots of light, Sontag tells us, is Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*, which teaches that "America's psychic survival entails her transformation through a political revolution." (It also teaches that, for blacks, rape can be a noble "insurrectionary act," a "defying and trampling on the white man's laws," but Sontag doesn't bother with that detail.)

According to her, “the power structure derives its credibility, its legitimacy, its energies from the dehumanization of the individuals who operate it. The people staffing IBM and General Motors, and the Pentagon, and United Fruit are the living dead.” Since the counterculture is not strong enough to overthrow IBM, the Pentagon, etc., it must opt for subversion. “Rock, grass, better orgasms, freaky clothes, grooving on nature—really grooving on anything—unfits, maladapt a person for the American way of life.” And here is where the Cubans come in: they come by this “new sensibility” naturally, possessing as they do a “southern spontaneity which we feel our own too white, death-ridden culture denies us. . . . The Cubans know a lot about spontaneity, gaiety, sensuality and freaking out. They are not linear, desiccated creatures of print culture.”

Indeed not: supine, desiccated creatures of a Communist tyranny would be more like it, though patronizing honky talk about “southern spontaneity” doubtless made things seem much better when this was written. In the great contest for writing the most fatuous line of political drivel, Sontag is always a contender. This essay contains at least two gems: after ten years, she writes, “the Cuban revolution is astonishingly free of repression and bureaucratization,” and, even better perhaps, is this passing remark delivered in parentheses: “No Cuban writer has been or is in jail, or is failing to get his work published.” Readers wishing to make a reality check should consult Paul Hollander’s classic study *Political Pilgrims: Western Intellectuals in Search of the Good Society* (fourth edition, 1998), which cites Sontag’s claim and then lists, in two or three pages, some of the many writers and artists who have been jailed, tortured, or executed by Castro’s spontaneous gaiety.

Sontag concocted a similar fairy tale when she went to Vietnam in 1968 courtesy of the North Vietnamese government. Her long essay “Trip to Hanoi” (1968) is another classic in the literature of political mendacity. Connoisseurs of the genre will especially savor Sontag’s observation that the real problem for the North Vietnamese is that they “aren’t good enough haters.” Their fondness for Americans, she explains, keeps getting in the way of the war effort. “They genuinely care about the welfare of the hundreds of captured American pilots and give them bigger rations than the Vietnamese population gets, ‘because they’re bigger than we are,’ as a Vietnamese army officer told me.” Sontag acknowledges that her account tended somewhat to idealize North Vietnam; but that was only because it was a country that “in many respects, *deserves* to be idealized.”

Unlike any country in Western Europe, and above all unlike the United States. In “What’s Happening in America (1966),” Sontag tells readers that what America “deserves” is to have its wealth “taken away” by the Third World. In one particularly notorious passage, she writes that “the truth is that Mozart, Pascal, Boolean algebra, Shakespeare, parliamentary government, baroque churches, Newton, the emancipation of women, Kant, Marx, and Balanchine ballets don’t redeem what this particular civilization has wrought upon the world. The white race *is* the cancer of human history.” After a bout with cancer in the 1970s, Sontag emended that last observation because on reflection she had come to realize that it was unfair—to cancer.

What can one say? Sontag excoriates the American economy for its “runaway rate of productivity.” But she has had no scruples about enjoying the fruits of that productivity: a Rockefeller Foundation grant in 1964, a Merrill Foundation grant in 1965, a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship in 1966, etc., etc., culminating in 1990 with a MacArthur Foundation “genius” award.

But it is not simply in such mundane terms that Sontag wants to have it both ways. Inveterate aestheticism entails intractable intellectual and moral frivolity. Sontag went on to blast the Castro regime for its brutal treatment of certain approved writers, but her condemnation meant little more than her initial enthusiasm. It was, as she might put it, merely “formal”: the content didn’t count. It was the same with her famous announcement at a left-wing symposium in 1982 that “Communism *is* fascism.” How piquant that Susan Sontag should utter this elementary truth! In her essay “On Style,” Sontag had assured her readers that Leni Riefenstahl’s Nazi films “transcend the categories of propaganda or even reportage”: the content of the films—i.e., their endorsement of Nazi ideology—has come “to play a purely formal role.” Ten years later, in an essay called “Fascinating Fascism” (1974) she says the opposite: that the “very conception” of *Triumph of the Will* “negates the possibility of the filmmaker’s having an aesthetic conception independent of propaganda.” Taxed by an interviewer with the contradiction, Sontag replies that “both statements illustrate the richness of the form-content distinction, as long as one is careful always to use it against itself.” “Rich” is indeed the *mot juste*. In her book *On Photography* (1977), Sontag says that photography transforms people into “tourists of reality.” It is a neat phrase: vivid, arresting, overstated. But as she has shown over and over, Sontag herself is just such a tourist. One day she embraces camp, the next day she warns about the “perils of over-generalizing the aesthetic view of life.” As Hilton Kramer observed, “it is not that Sontag was ever prepared to abandon her stand on aestheticism and all its implications. It was only that she did not want it to cost her anything.” Sontag once noted that “the relation between boredom and Camp taste cannot be overestimated.” One suspects that boredom underlies a good deal of her unhappy radicalism. Discontented with “the Matthew Arnold notion of culture,” she abandoned the question of “how to live” and became instead a prophet of the new sensibility of aesthetic nihilism

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