

Susan Sontag (1933-2004): critic, novelist, and reformer of medical language

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Abstract: Throughout a career spanning nearly five decades, the North American critic and novelist Susan Sontag wrote prolifically on aesthetics, politics, and the social and ethical dimensions of art and language. Much of her early non-fiction focused on society's obsessive but futile search for meaning in works of art. Later she explored the capacity of photographs to deaden the viewer's sense of reality and the corresponding emotional response. Her monographs on medical language exposed the unwholesome influence of metaphors drawn from warfare and of judgmental attitudes toward people with cancer and AIDS.

Susan Sontag (1933-2004): crítica social, novelista y reformadora del lenguaje médico

Resumen: A lo largo de una trayectoria profesional que abarcó casi cinco decenios, la crítica social y novelista estadounidense Susan Sontag escribió prolíficamente sobre una variedad de temas, entre ellos la estética, la política y las resonancias sociales y éticas del arte y del lenguaje. La mayor parte de su obra temprana que no es de ficción se centró en el obsesivo y fútil afán de la sociedad por encontrar un significado en el arte. Más tarde la autora exploró el efecto embotador de las fotografías sobre el sentido de la realidad del espectador y sobre su respuesta emocional a ella. Sus monografías sobre el lenguaje médico denunciaron la influencia malsana de metáforas referentes a la guerra y de actitudes de prejuicio contra las personas que padecen de cáncer y sida.

Key words: AIDS, cancer, metaphor, Susan Sontag. **Palabras clave:** cáncer, metáfora, sida, Susan Sontag.

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In December 2004, death due to leukemia silenced a voice that had been raised during more than four decades to promote the literary avant-garde, to defend unpopular causes, and to expose and condemn international bigotry and belligerency. Susan Sontag, North American writer and citizen of the world, first came into prominence in the 1960s as a commentator on modern culture and went on to write novels, short stories, and monographs on various aspects of aesthetics.

Eventually she became a cultural icon herself, a leader of the radical-liberal party of intellectuals and a vocal opponent of social and military oppression and violence, including unilateralism and preventive warfare as features of US foreign policy. In the 1970s, a diagnosis of metastatic cancer prompted her to write a perceptive and highly influential study, *Illness as Metaphor*, exploring hidden psychological and social connotations of medical language.

Susan Sontag was born Susan Rosenblatt in New York City on January 16, 1933. Her father, of Lithuanian descent, died of tuberculosis when she was five. Raised in Arizona and California, she later took the name of her mother's second husband, Nathan Sontag, although never legally adopted by him.

As a child she gave evidence of intellectual precocity and became an omnivorous reader. By skipping three years of elementary school, she was able to enter the University of California at Berkeley at the age of 15. After one year there she transferred to the University of Chicago, from which she received a BA degree in 1951. A precipitate marriage at age 17 to one of her professors, Philip Rieff, produced a son and ended eight years later in divorce. She never remarried.

She did graduate work in philosophy, literature, and theology at Harvard, earning a master's degree in philosophy. A fellowship enabled her to pursue further studies at St. Anne's College, Oxford, but she quickly moved on from there to the University of Paris. She spent four years in Paris, participating in the café culture during a time of great intellectual and artistic ferment, the era of Sartre, Cocteau, Ionesco, Barthes, and Édith Piaf.

After her return to the US in the early 1960s she lectured on philosophy at the City College of New York and Sarah Lawrence College, and on the philosophy of religion at Columbia University. She soon joined Manhattan's bohemian intellectual clique and embarked on a career as a writer, publishing socio-political commentary in the *Partisan Review*, literary criticism in the *New York Review of Books* and other publications, and an experimental novel, *The Benefactor* (1963).

The subjects of her nonfiction writing were remarkably diverse. She became an advocate of European modernism in literature and the arts, seeking to popularize the works of Sartre, Camus, Simone Weil, Beckett, Godard, and Lévi-Strauss, but also promoting such native avant-garde figures as John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Kenneth Anger, and Jasper Johns.

Her literary output eventually included four novels, many short stories, several monographs, and several collections of essays. She also wrote and directed plays and feature-length films in both the US and abroad. Her books have been translated into more than 30 languages. Later in her career she made many public appearances to lecture on or debate topics of social or artistic relevance, or to read from her works.

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In 1984 she was named an Officier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French government, and in 1999 she was made a Commandeur of the same order. Among many other awards and honors that she received may be mentioned the Malaparte Prize in Italy (1992); the Jerusalem Prize (2001), awarded every two years to a writer whose work explores the freedom of the individual in society; the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade (Friedenspreis des deutschen Buchhandels) and the Premio Príncipe de Asturias de la Letras (Spain), both in 2003.

An integral feature of her personality was her passionate and courageous opposition to political oppression and militarism. In May 1968, at the height of the US bombing in North Vietnam, she spent two weeks in Hanoi and later infuriated US conservatives by her defense of Vietnamese Communism. In the early 1990s she objected vigorously to Serbian aggression in Bosnia and Kosovo, which she called the "Spanish Civil War of our time." She spent many months in Sarajevo and openly advocated US and European military intervention.

After the destruction of the World Trade Center towers in New York City by terrorists on September 11, 2001, she wrote in *The New Yorker* that "...this was not a 'cowardly' attack on 'civilization' or 'liberty' or 'humanity' or the 'free world' but an attack on the world's self-proclaimed superpower, undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and actions." Predictably, she later expressed violent opposition to President George W. Bush's military retaliation against Afghanistan and Iraq.

In 1976 Sontag learned that she had breast cancer with metastases. After a radical mastectomy and chemotherapy, she was pronounced free of disease. In 1998 she was diagnosed with a uterine sarcoma and again achieved a cure. Finally, in March 2004, she was found to have leukemia. Carlos Fuentes, who had first met her in New York in 1963, described his last encounter with her in Montréal: "Recuperada de dos batallas contra el cáncer, me dijo sonriendo: 'Como en el béisbol, a la tercera va la vencida. Three strikes and you're out.'"

Despite a bone marrow transplant, Susan Sontag died December 28, 2004, at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in Manhattan.

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A brilliant, incisive, and individualistic thinker, Sontag drew on her rigorous classical training and her voluminous reading and cosmopolitan culture to impart breadth and depth to her writing. But she was more aesthete than critic, more intellectual than sage. She wrote in an ambivalent, speculative, discursively amorphous style, sometimes brashly epigrammatic, as when she said, "The white race is the cancer of human history," and sometimes pungently sarcastic, as when, in retracting that statement, she remarked that it slandered cancer patients. Her fiction is heavy with symbolism and allegory, her nonfiction rich in insights and feelings, her rhetoric compelling even when her logic seems most tenuous.

Throughout her lengthy and very public career she evoked widely varying responses. "No conozco a ningún otro intelectual

que tenga una mente tan clara y esa capacidad de enlazar, conectar, relacionar," said Fuentes. He referred to her as "la mujer más inteligente que he conocido." Years earlier, Jean-Paul Sartre had expressed exactly the same appraisal.

Time magazine said of her, "She has come to symbolize the writer and thinker in many variations: as analyst, rhapsodist, and roving eye, as public scold and portable conscience." But William Deresiewicz, in reviewing a collection of her later essays (*Where the Stress Falls*) in *The New York Times*, wrote, "...never before has she made such large claims for her moral pre-eminence, her exemplary fulfillment of the intellectual's mission as society's conscience. In effect, she's the first person in a long while to nominate herself so publicly for sainthood."

Her nonfiction alienated many academics, and while her fiction won critical acclaim, it earned little money. Possessing a "healthy" ego, she often sparked controversy and invited hostility by her oracular pronouncements, her impassioned espousal of offbeat causes, and her occasional reversals of position.

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Sontag laid the foundations of a constantly broadening theory of aesthetics and criticism in her essay, "Against Interpretation" (*Evergreen Review*, 1964), reprinted in 1966 in a collection with the same title. The central theme of this seminal document is that a work of art must stand or fall on the basis of the responses it generates in those who experience it—that efforts to find its "meaning" or to distinguish between its form and its content cannot enhance its value but only cheapen it. "To interpret is to restate the phenomenon, in effect to find an equivalent for it... To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world—in order to set up a shadow world of 'meanings.'" In the years to come she would restate in many different ways her aversion to what she perceived as philistinism in art, ethics, and life.

Her "Notes on Camp," also written in 1964 and republished in the same collection, catalogues in a series of 58 numbered "jottings" some distinctive features of the marginal, aberrant, quirky, overstated gay aestheticism then better known as "Camp" (etymology obscure), which is "good because it's awful." "The essence of Camp," Sontag said, "is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration. And Camp is esoteric—something of a private code, a badge of identity even, among small urban cliques.... Jews and homosexuals are the outstanding creative minorities in contemporary urban culture." (The writer was Jewish and bisexual.)

Not content to muzzle the critic, as she had done in "Against Interpretation," she proceeded to condemn the artist, and art itself, to self-negation and ultimate extinction. In "The Aesthetics of Silence" (1967), reprinted in *Styles of Radical Will* (1969), she wrote, "...Art must tend toward anti-art...the substitution of chance for intention, and the pursuit of silence." According to Sontag, John Cage's notorious piano "composition" "4' 33" (1952), which consists of 4 minutes and 33 seconds of total silence, is legitimate art because it elicits a

reaction from its “hearers.” Moreover, she professed to see the madness of the French Surrealist poet and dramatist Antonin Artaud and the suicide of the German novelist Heinrich von Kleist as logical culminations of their creative development. This aesthetic nihilism, which drifts perilously close to nonsense, was evidently taken seriously by many readers.

In the 1970s, retreating from paradox and the avant-garde, Sontag focused her attention on the social and ethical features of a uniquely “real” representational art form in a series of essays on photography and cinema in the *New York Review of Books*. These were collected in a book entitled *On Photography* (1977), which does not contain a single photograph. “When anything can be photographed,” she said, “and photography has destroyed the boundaries and definitions of art, a viewer can approach a photograph freely with no expectations of discovering what it means.”

Still gripped by a deep distrust of the interpretive process, she questioned the assumption that a photograph delivers a slice of truth—that the viewer can actually “acquire” a portion of real life through an image inserted between experience and reality. As Sontag matured, the moral dimensions of aesthetics assumed growing importance for her. She expressed the opinion that the universal availability of images of suffering dilutes their message and weakens the emotional response of the viewer.

She pursued that line in a much later book, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003). After exploring the social and psychological impact of representations of atrocity—Goya’s *Los Desastres de la Guerra*, photographs of the American Civil War, lynchings of Blacks in the American South, victims of starvation and torture at Dachau and Auschwitz, contemporary images of Bosnia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, and New York City on September 11, 2001—she concluded that “our culture of spectatorship neutralizes the moral force of photographs of atrocities.” A steady diet of shocking images, whether presented as “information,” “news,” or “art,” erodes the viewer’s perception of reality, numbs sensitivity to cruelty and horror, and deadens compassion.

Compassion, indeed, is her central theme. She is concerned not so much with the plight of the victims of poverty, warfare, and natural disaster who are depicted in documentary photographs as with the emotional response, or lack thereof, engendered in the viewer. Photographic images, instead of arousing pity by bridging the gap between the observer in a wealthy country of the free West and the poor, oppressed, disenfranchised of Asia and Africa, only emphasize their distance and remoteness and induce a comfortable sense of unreality.

She invites the viewer to cast off the shell of objectivity, the mood of cold analysis. “Let the atrocious images haunt us. Even if they are only tokens, and cannot possibly encompass most of the reality to which they refer, they still perform a vital function. The images say: This is what human beings are capable of doing—may volunteer to do, enthusiastically, self-righteously. Don’t forget.” Again this book does not contain a single image except for the hair-raising etching by Goya that appears on its cover, a picture of a military officer reclining at his ease while contemplating, with bored detachment, the hanging corpse of an enemy soldier.

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In 1978, Sontag’s experiences as a cancer patient sent her thoughts and creative drive in a new direction. Like most professional writers, she was awed by the potential for good and evil of her chosen medium, the printed word. During the course of her treatment she had observed that words and phrases used to describe cancer had a profound effect on her attitude toward her disease, and on the attitudes of fellow patients and even of their families and friends and the health professionals who were taking care of them.

She found that words like “victim,” “ravage,” “malignant,” and “invasive,” by depicting cancer as an evil, invincible predator, create a demoralizing atmosphere of terror and defeatism, aggravating the patient’s sufferings and creating obstacles to effective treatment. She exposed this destructive aspect of medical language in an essay entitled “Illness as Metaphor.”

Again she attacked society’s obsession with “meaning”: “Cancer patients are lied to, not just because the disease is (or is thought to be) a death sentence, but because it is felt to be obscene—in the original meaning of that word: ill-omened, abominable, repugnant to the senses.”

Contrasting the 20th-century image of cancer as a destructive force with the 19th-century romantic image of tuberculosis as an enhancement of identity, she showed how both diseases have become associated with personal psychological traits. “With the modern diseases (once TB, now cancer), the romantic idea that the disease expresses the character is invariably extended to assert that the character causes the disease—because it has not expressed itself. Passion moves inward, striking and blighting the deepest cellular recesses.”

She condemned this accusatory aspect of disease metaphors, arguing that cancer is not a curse, not a punishment, not an occasion for embarrassment. She called for a revision of medical and lay terminology pertaining to illness, particularly cancer, a substitution of positive and life-affirming expressions for those supporting a pessimistic mythology of despair.

In 1986 the discovery that a friend was dying of AIDS inspired Sontag to write a short story exploring the response of society to this new and terrifying disease, even more fraught with “meaning” than cancer. Completed in two days, “The Way We Live Now,” with a title borrowed from a novel by Anthony Trollope, records the reactions of a group of New Yorkers to the news that a friend has AIDS. (The patient is never named, and neither is the disease.)

Originally published in *The New Yorker*, the story was issued as a small paperback with illustrations by Howard Hodgkin in 1991. “The Way We Live Now” consists almost exclusively of fragments of conversation among the dying man’s numerous friends, who express shock, pain, bewilderment, blame, guilt, and fear. Besides accurately capturing the spirit of those days when AIDS was new, this work conveys a message that transcends its reportorial mission: how a network of friends can become a community of healing.

Less than two years after the appearance of that story, Sontag undertook a nonfiction study of AIDS in the form of a

revision and expansion of “Illness As Metaphor.” *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1988), a book of fewer than 100 pages, recorded the waning of cultural myths about cancer but lamented the proliferation of still more objectionable metaphoric imagery surrounding AIDS.

AIDS, like cancer, is perceived as an enemy that invades and destroys from within. Hence the resurgence of military metaphors, and descriptions of the disease in the lay press couched in the language of political paranoia. But, also like cancer, AIDS carries a second burden of meaning—this one far more cogent and confounding than in the case of malignant disease.

Because a diagnosis of AIDS often reveals the patient’s membership in a “risk group” that is defined by a species of misbehavior, the disease is too readily identified as punishment. By the same line of reasoning that labels lung cancer as the “penalty” for cigarette smoking, AIDS becomes the “price” one pays for sexual perversion or drug abuse. And because society judges those illicit pursuits more harshly than it judges smoking, AIDS is all the more enthusiastically perceived as just retribution for evil living and a valid excuse for stigmatizing its sufferers.

AIDS is a modern-day plague, in the broad sense of ‘epidemic’ or ‘pestilence.’ Plagues were formerly interpreted as collective calamities visited on populations from “somewhere else.” When syphilis first appeared in Europe at the end of the 15th century, each ethnic group fathered it on another ethnic group: the “French” pox, the “Italian” disease, the “Turkish” disease. The origin of AIDS in Africa (not yet fully confirmed when Sontag wrote) lends it an aura of alienness, an association with the primitive, the dark, the bestial, reinforcing and reinforced by Western prejudices against Blacks and indeed all that is foreign.

In Scripture and classical literature, plagues were often presented as judgments on society, divine retribution for impiety, licentiousness, or other evil ways. By the late 19th century, advances in microbiology had shown that physical and not moral uncleanness—polluted food and water, urban crowding, dirt, and decay—sets the stage for epidemics of infectious disease.

In that new light, pestilence became something to be prevented by the adoption of hygienic practices and habits of physical cleanliness, rather than moral reform. But with the appearance of AIDS, society once again had an object for its itch to judge and pillory. Because the “gay plague” is transmitted sexually, what could be more natural than to redefine it in moral terms?

AIDS is doubly abhorrent because it is both incurred by the “guilty” and seen as a threat to the “innocent.” Repeated references to pollution and contamination denigrate, alienate, ostracize, and criminalize the afflicted. Media hysteria featuring apocalyptic, end-of-the-world rhetoric and figurative images of military assault, revolt, and reprisal seem to justify proposals to exclude, incarcerate, or deport people with AIDS.

Metaphor, literally ‘a carrying over,’ is language that speciously asserts the identity of disparate things. Sontag shows

that the process works both ways. AIDS has become a figure for furtive and subversive operations, political corruption, and every variety of decadence. Drawing parallels between advice for protection against computer viruses and advice for preventing the transmission of AIDS, she demonstrates how HIV provides a whole lexicon of ready-made symbolic language: the virus is *furtive, lurking, mutable, self-copying*.

AIDS and Its Metaphors makes its strongest case against military imagery, which “overmobilizes, ...overdescribes, and...powerfully contributes to the excommunicating and stigmatizing of the ill.”

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Child prodigy and Renaissance person, sociopolitical firebrand and weathervane of post-modernist taste, Susan Sontag wrote prolifically in several genres. Most of her fiction is forgettable, and little of her criticism will survive. But her writings on medical language and AIDS, by raising the consciousness of a generation to the pernicious interaction between metaphor and public and private perceptions of what it means to be sick, wrought what promises to be an enduring influence on lay and medical journalism.

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