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Introduction

by Merve Emre

A certain anxiety besieges the critic asked to introduce a volume of earlier writings on women, lest she should find the ideas expressed in them interesting only as relics of a distant, less enlightened past. What a relief it is to revisit the essays and interviews in Susan Sontag's *On Women* and to find them incapable of aging badly. It is true that the pieces are almost fifty years old, but far from prompting the gentle rebuke that they are "of their time," the effect of reading them today is to marvel at the untimeliness of their genius. They contain no ready-made ideas, no borrowed rhetoric—nothing that risks hardening into dogma or cant. They offer us only the spectacle of a ferocious intellect setting itself to the task at hand: to articulate the politics and aesthetics of being a woman in the United States, the Americas, and the world.

The singular glamour of Susan Sontag has done her some injustice, particularly where matters of sex and gender are concerned. Suspicious of her celebrity, convinced that her success had rendered her immune to the plights of ordinary women, her critics have characterized her

relationship to the second sex as inconstant at best and faithless at worst. One can hardly miss the insinuation in, for instance, the poet and feminist activist Adrienne Rich's letter to *The New York Review of Books*, objecting to Sontag's essay on Leni Riefenstahl, "Fascinating Fascism." Dismissing Sontag's suggestion that feminists bore some responsibility for turning Riefenstahl's films into cultural monuments, Rich noted the "running criticism by radical feminists of male-identified 'successful' women, whether they are artists, executives, psychiatrists, Marxists, politicians, or scholars." It was no accident that, in Rich's letter, "male-identified" values extended beyond professional success to encompass the aesthetic and ethical phenomena that Sontag was drawn to in her writing: the metamorphosis of people into objects, the obliteration of personality by style, the pursuit of perfection through domination and submission—all painted with the same broad brush of patriarchy to indict the critic attracted to them.

We may agree with Rich that Sontag did not ally herself with the radical feminist movement. She questioned its inherited political rhetoric ("that of gauchisme," she wrote in her journal) and its dismissal of the intellect as "bourgeois, phallocentric, repressive." "Like all capital moral truths, feminism is a bit simple-minded," she observed in her response to Rich. Yet unless we consent to treating the moralizing rejection of "male-identified" women and values as a litmus test for what it means to be a feminist, we must remain skeptical of Rich's assertion that Sontag's

writings on women were "more of an intellectual exercise than the expression of a felt reality—her own—interpreted by a keen mind."

In a journal entry from 1972, Sontag noted that "Women" was one of the three themes she had been following all her life, the other two being "China" and "Freaks." It was only in the 1970s, however, that the theme became central to her writing. The historical explanation is straightforward enough. The years from 1968 to 1973 were the most publicly visible and active stretch of the women's movement in the United States, years that appear to us now in an energetic sequence of film dissolves: women burning bras, women marching in the streets and swaying at candlelight vigils, women distributing mimeographed sheets with topics for consciousness raising, including equal pay, domestic violence, housework, childcare, and the right to an abortion; women thumbing through copies of *The Second Sex*, *The Feminine Mystique*, *The Dialectic of Sex*, and *Sexual Politics* with great intent. Nearly every notable woman essayist opined on the movement, often by assuming a tone of cool, disdainful skepticism toward its goals and principles. Today, one reads essays like Elizabeth Hardwick's curiously scattered "Women Re Women" or Joan Didion's vicious and startlingly shallow "The Women's Movement" with a vague sense of unease or, quite simply, bafflement at their authors' lack of fellow feeling, their lack of interest in the conditions that touched their lives as profoundly as the lives of women whom they condescended to so freely and gladly.

By contrast, Sontag's essays and interviews are forceful, sympathetic, exceedingly truthful, and capacious in their imagination of what a woman is or could be. In a different world, *On Women* would have been the collection of essays that appeared between *Styles of Radical Will* (1969) and *Under the Sign of Saturn* (1980). The pieces gathered here represent an overlooked half decade of Sontag's writing, much of it undertaken between her trip to Vietnam and her first cancer diagnosis. Reading *On Women* in the context of both her individual history and history writ large, one realizes that the pieces in it were bracketed by death—that her entire notion of women was death-ridden, haunted by an awareness of mortality and the universal decline of the mind and body. "Thinking about my own death the other day, as I often do, I made a discovery," she wrote in her journal in 1974. "I realized that my way of thinking has up to now been both too abstract and too concrete. Too abstract: death. Too concrete: me. For there was a middle term, both abstract and concrete: women. I am a woman. And thereby, a whole new universe of death rose before my eyes." The specter of death spurred her to reconsider the relationship between the individual and the collective, between the lone woman and women as a historical category, capable of evolving and transforming over time. And she did so in a style that was more restrained and matter-of-fact than the flamboyant, belligerent beauty of her earlier essays, as if to speak of women as a whole required her, in part, to efface her exceptional self.

In the essays, death assumes many strange guises.

Only rarely does it appear as she had imagined it would in her journal, in the gruesome forms of rape and murder and slavery. (A tantalizing journal entry contains notes for an essay she never wrote that she wanted to call "On Women Dying" or "How Women Die.") Sometimes, as in "The Third World of Women," her extraordinary 1972 interview with the leftist quarterly *Libre*, death was the will to self-annihilation of the entire global order, whose ideology of unlimited growth went hand in hand with "ever-increasing levels of productivity and consumption; the unlimited cannibalization of the environment." Women and men alike were ensnared by this naked, howling desire to accumulate more and more and more, but women were additionally oppressed by the institution of the nuclear family, "a prison of sexual repression, a playing field of inconsistent moral laxity, a museum of possessiveness, a guilt-producing factory, and a school of selfishness." The fact that the family was also the source of apparently unalienated values ("warmth, trust, dialogue, uncompetitiveness, loyalty, spontanety, sexual pleasure, fun") only increased its power.

In articulating this double diagnosis, Sontag was careful to distance herself from the rhetoric of the socialist or Marxist feminists of the era; there is, throughout the interview, a noticeable allergy to political radicalism and a deep conviction that work may be a source of pride, affirmation, and justifiable social and cultural distinction. Yet she understood as well as these feminists did that the integrity of the family depended on the exploitation of women's

unwaged, domestic labor, and on devaluing this labor as playing nothing other than a "supportive, backup role in the economy." "Women who have gained the freedom to go out into 'the world' but still have the responsibility for marketing, cooking, cleaning, and the children when they return from work have simply doubled their labor," she insisted. Liberation from death into life required a revolution that would overthrow the desire to accrete capital and the authoritarian moral habits that kept the division of labor—men at work, women in the home—intact.

Most often, however, death appeared in these essays as the slow erosion of one's sense of self and the painful contraction of life's possibilities. Sontag described it with terrible clarity and frankness in "The Double Standard of Aging." "Growing older is mainly an ordeal of the imagination—a moral disease, a social pathology—intrinsic to which is the fact that it afflicts women much more than men," she wrote. Day by day, the horizons of one's possibilities dimmed and receded. The body began to bear the signs of its diminishment; it was exposed as the most intimate traitor to the vision of the firm, unlined self that was forged in youth. Yet the vision was itself traitorous to women, Sontag insisted. "Beauty, women's business in this society, is the theater of their enslavement. Only one standard of female beauty is sanctioned: the *girl*." Women were not permitted to change, were not allowed to cast off their smooth innocence and docility in favor of wisdom, competence, strength, and ambition without fear of social recrimination. The essays in *On Women* make clear that, for

her, the oppression of women presented an aesthetic and narrative problem as well as a political and economic one.

Does beauty pose a problem for feminism? Perhaps the better question to ask of Sontag's essays is: Does beauty pose a problem for how women imagine their futures? What would it mean to be liberated from beauty's conventional images, its stock stories? It is always a little embarrassing for a beautiful woman to write about physical beauty, for she finds she must serve as both the subject and the object of her judgments. But it is just as embarrassing, if not more, for her to admit that her beauty has started to crumple, to fade; for her beauty to define her now not by its startling presence, but by its absence. Sontag was thirty-nine, on the cusp of forty, when she wrote "The Double Standard of Aging"—one of the only personal details she reveals throughout *On Women*. She was in her early forties when she wrote the two short essays on beauty, "A Woman's Beauty: Put-Down or Power Source?" and "Beauty: How Will It Change Next?" "To be sure, beauty is a form of power. And deservedly so," she wrote. Yet it was a power that had always been conceived in relation to men: "not the power to do but the power to attract." "It is a power that negates itself. For this power is not one that can be chosen freely—at least, not by women—or renounced without social censure."

In her quest to place women in a fresher and more empowered relation to beauty, she was aided by her longstanding suspicion of beauty as a judgment of both people and artworks. It was a suspicion she first aired formally in

Notes on "Camp," in which she implied that the alliance brokered between beauty and mass civilization had authorized a certain tedium and predictability of taste. In *On Women*, that alliance helped to secure the oppression of women by holding them to standards of self-presentation that are at once too flexible, too quick to essentialize the whims of the market and its aesthetic values; and too rigid, incapable of bestowing social recognition upon those who were old, loud, ugly, unfeminine, disabled. If, as she argued, beauty had been "abridged in order to prop up the mythology of the 'feminine,'" then a more shocking and forgiving definition of beauty required unsexing it, violently. Beauty would no longer be subject to the approval of men; it would appropriate the masculine to do women's bidding for them.

Camp is the hidden nerve running through the essays in *On Women*. Initially conceived of by Sontag as apolitical, in these essays, it emerges the privileged sensibility of a politics of feminist liberation. If camp meant going against the grain of one's sex by engaging in a "robust, shrill, vulgar parody" of gender, as she described it in her interview with *Salmagundi* magazine, then there is something fantastically campy in her imagination of the politics of consciousness raising. She encouraged women to think of themselves as actors in a "guerrilla theater" or revolution, in which they would perform the following acts in the most exaggerated and contemptuous manner possible:

> They should whistle at men in the streets, raid beauty parlors, picket toy manufacturers who produce sexist

> toys, convert in sizeable numbers to militant lesbianism, operate their own free psychiatric and abortion clinics, provide feminist divorce counseling, establish makeup withdrawal centers, adopt their mothers' family names as their last names, deface billboard advertising that insults women, disrupt public events by singing in honor of the docile wives of male celebrities and politicians, collect pledges to renounce alimony and giggling, bring lawsuits for defamation against the mass-circulation "women's magazines," conduct telephone harassment campaigns against male psychiatrists who have sexual relations with their women patients, organize beauty contests for men, put up feminist candidates for all public offices.

"Women will be much more effective politically if they are rude, shrill, and—by sexist standards—'unattractive,'" she proposed. "They will be met with ridicule, which they should do more than bear stoically. They should, indeed, welcome it." Welcoming it helped neutralize the sexist condemnation of men. But it was also the first step toward eradicating the ideological division of men and women along lines of sex—for her, the ultimate end of feminist revolution. "A society in which women are subjectively and objectively the genuine equals of men . . . will necessarily be an androgynous society." She did not value separatism, the aggressive policing of the boundaries of who was or was not a woman, what was or was not beautiful. She valued the blatant disorganization of gender and

sexuality and the individual's right to plural forms of being; her right to her many fractured selves. She envisioned an aesthetic and political integration of men and women that would, in the final analysis, result in the obliteration of both categories of identity. Then there would be no need for women to establish for themselves a private culture, no need for them to seek rooms of their own. "It's just that they should be seeking to abolish," she concluded.

It is the interviews that stand out to me as the secret treasures of *On Women* and of Sontag's oeuvre in general, for it is the interviews that make the most space for a plurality of style and thought that mirrored her belief in the plurality of the self. "To be an intellectual is to be attached to the inherent value of plurality, and to the right of critical space (space for critical opposition within society)," she wrote in her journal. One finds in the interviews a voice that is rigorous still, but bolder and freer and more gladiatorial in its pronouncements. We hear, once more, the eager combativeness of her earlier essays. We hear, too, her willingness to respond, challenge, qualify, speculate; her refusal of easy answers or offended pieties. We feel the hunger that drove her to keep thinking. And we feel, across the great and growing distance of time, the force of her demand that we never stop thinking alongside her.