Susan Sontag, The Art of Fiction No. 143

Interviewed by Edward Hirsch

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Susan Sontag lives in a sparsely furnished five-room apartment on the top floor of a building in Chelsea on the west side of Manhattan. Books—as many as fifteen thousand—and papers are everywhere. A lifetime could be

spent browsing through the books on art and architecture, theater and dance, philosophy and psychiatry, the history of medicine, and the history of religion, photography, and opera—and so on. The various European literatures—French, German, Italian, Spanish, Russian, etcetera, as well as hundreds of books of Japanese literature and books on Japan—are arranged by language in a loosely chronological way. So is American literature as well as English literature, which runs from *Beowulf* to, say, James Fenton. Sontag is an inveterate clipper, and the books are filled with scraps of paper ("Each book is marked and filleted," she says), the bookcases festooned with notes scrawled with the names of additional things to read.

Sontag usually writes by hand on a low marble table in the living room. Small theme notebooks are filled with notes for her novel in progress, "In America." An old book on Chopin sits atop a history of table manners. The room is lit by a lovely Fortuny lamp, or a replica of one. Piranesi prints decorate the wall (architectural prints are one of her passions).

Everything in Sontag's apartment testifies to the range of her interests, but it is the work itself, like her conversation, that demonstrates the passionate nature of her commitments. She is eager to follow a subject wherever it leads, as far as it will go—and beyond. What she has said about Roland Barthes is true about her as well: "It was not a question of knowledge . . . but of alertness, a fastidious transcription of what *could* be thought about something, once it swam into the stream of attention."

Sontag was interviewed in her Manhattan apartment on three blisteringly hot days in July of 1994. She had been

traveling back and forth to Sarajevo, and it was gracious of her to set aside time for the interview. Sontag is a prodigious talker—candid, informal, learned, ardent—and each day at a wooden kitchen table held forth for seven- and eight-hour stretches. The kitchen is a mixed-use room, but the fax machine and the photocopier were silent; the telephone seldom rang. The conversation ranged over a vast array of subjects—later the texts would be scoured and revised—but always returned to the pleasures and distinctions of literature. Sontag is interested in all things concerning writing—from the mechanism of the process to the high nature of the calling. She has many missions, but foremost among them is the vocation of the writer.

INTERVIEWER

When did you begin writing?

SUSAN SONTAG

I'm not sure. But I know I was self-publishing when I was about nine; I started a four-page monthly newspaper, which I hectographed (a very primitive method of duplication) in about twenty copies and sold for five cents to the neighbors. The paper, which I kept going for several years, was filled with imitations of things I was reading. There were stories, poems and two plays that I remember, one inspired by Čapek's *R.U.R.*, the other by Edna St. Vincent Millay's *Aria de Capo*. And accounts of battles—Midway, Stalingrad, and so on; remember, this was 1942, 1943, 1944—dutifully condensed from articles in real newspapers.

INTERVIEWER

We've had to postpone this interview several times because of your frequent trips to Sarajevo that, you've told me, have been one of the most compelling experiences of your life. I was thinking how war recurs in your work and life.

SONTAG

It does. I made two trips to North Vietnam under American bombardment, the first of which I recounted in "Trip to Hanoi," and when the Yom Kippur War started in 1973 I went to Israel to shoot a film, *Promised Lands*, on the front lines. Bosnia is actually my third war.

INTERVIEWER

There's the denunciation of military metaphors in *Illness as Metaphor*. And the narrative climax of *The Volcano Lover*, a horrifying evocation of the viciousness of war. And when I asked you to contribute to a book I was editing, *Transforming Vision: Writers on Art*, the work you chose to write about was Goya's *The Disasters of War*.

SONTAG

I suppose it could seem odd to travel to a war, and not just in one's imagination—even if I do come from a family of travelers. My father, who was a fur trader in northern China, died there during the Japanese invasion—I was five. I remember hearing about "world war" in September 1939, entering elementary school, where my best friend in the class was a Spanish Civil War refugee. I remember panicking on December 7, 1941. And one of the first pieces of

language I ever pondered over was "for the duration"—as in "there's no butter for the duration." I recall savoring the oddity, and the optimism, of that phrase.

INTERVIEWER

In "Writing Itself," on Roland Barthes, you express surprise that Barthes, whose father was killed in one of the battles of the First World War (Barthes was an infant) and who, as a young man himself, lived through the Second World War—the Occupation—never once mentions the word *war* in any of his writings. But your work seems haunted by war.

SONTAG

I could answer that a writer is someone who pays attention to the world.

INTERVIEWER

You once wrote of *Promised Lands*: "My subject is war, and anything about any war that does not show the appalling concreteness of destruction and death is a dangerous lie."

SONTAG

That prescriptive voice rather makes me cringe. But . . . yes.

INTERVIEWER

Are you writing about the siege of Sarajevo?

SONTAG

No. I mean, not yet, and probably not for a long time. And

almost certainly not in the form of an essay or report. David Rieff, who is my son, and who started going to Sarajevo before I did, has published such an essay-report, a book called *Slaughterhouse*—and one book in the family on the Bosnian genocide is enough. So I'm not spending time in Sarajevo to write about it. For the moment it's enough for me just to be there as much as I can—to witness, to lament, to offer a model of noncomplicity, to pitch in. The duties of a human being, one who believes in right action, not of a writer.

INTERVIEWER

Did you always want to be a writer?

SONTAG

I read the biography of Madame Curie by her daughter, Eve Curie, when I was about six, so at first I thought I was going to be a chemist. Then for a long time, most of my childhood, I wanted to be a physician. But literature swamped me. What I really wanted was every kind of life, and the writer's life seemed the most inclusive.

INTERVIEWER

Did you have any role models as a writer?

SONTAG

Of course I thought I was Jo in *Little Women*. But I didn't want to write what Jo wrote. Then in *Martin Eden* I found a writer-protagonist with whose writing I could identify, so then I wanted to be Martin Eden—minus, of course, the

dreary fate Jack London gives him. I saw myself as (I guess I was) a heroic autodidact. I looked forward to the struggle of the writing life. I thought of being a writer as a heroic vocation.

INTERVIEWER

Any other models?

SONTAG

Later, when I was thirteen, I read the journals of André Gide, which described a life of great privilege and relentless avidity.

INTERVIEWER

Do you remember when you started reading?

SONTAG

When I was three, I'm told. Anyway, I remember reading real books—biographies, travel books—when I was about six. And then free fall into Poe and Shakespeare and Dickens and the Brontës and Victor Hugo and Schopenhauer and Pater, and so on. I got through my childhood in a delirium of literary exaltations.

INTERVIEWER

You must have been very different from other children.

SONTAG

Was I? I was good at dissembling too. I didn't think that

much about myself, I was so glad to be on to something better. But I so wanted to be elsewhere. And reading produced its blissful, confirming alienations. Because of reading—and music—my daily experience was of living in a world of people who didn't give a hoot about the intensities to which I had pledged myself. I felt as if I were from another planet— a fantasy borrowed from the innocent comic books of that era, to which I was also addicted. And of course I didn't really have much sense of how I was seen by others. Actually, I never thought people were thinking of me at all. I do remember—I was about four—a scene in a park, hearing my Irish nanny saying to another giant in a starched white uniform, Susan is very high-strung, and thinking, That's an interesting word. Is it true?

INTERVIEWER

Tell me something about your education.

SONTAG

All in public schools, quite a number of them, each one more lowering than the one before. But I was lucky to have started school before the era of the child psychologists. Since I could read and write, I was immediately put into the third grade, and later I was skipped another semester, so I was graduated from high school—North Hollywood High School—when I was still fifteen. After that, I had a splendid education at Berkeley, then at the so-called Hutchins College of the University of Chicago, and then as a graduate student in philosophy at Harvard and Oxford. I was a student for most of the 1950s and I never had a teacher from whom I didn't learn. But at Chicago, the most

important of my universities, there were not just teachers I admired but three to whose influence I gratefully submitted: Kenneth Burke, Richard McKeon, and Leo Strauss.

INTERVIEWER

What was Burke like as a teacher?

SONTAG

Completely inside his own enthralling way of unpacking a text. He spent almost a year with the class reading Conrad's *Victory* word by word, image by image. It was from Burke that I learned how to read. I still read the way he taught me. He took some interest in me. I had already read some of his books before he was my teacher in Humanities III; remember, he wasn't well known then and he'd never met an undergraduate who had read him while still in high school. He gave me a copy of his novel, *Towards a Better Life*, and told me stories about sharing an apartment in Greenwich Village in the 1920s with Hart Crane and Djuna Barnes—you can imagine what that did to me. He was the first person I met who had written books that I owned. (I except an audience I was roped into with Thomas Mann when I was fourteen years old, which I recounted in a story called "Pilgrimage.") Writers were as remote to me as movie stars.

INTERVIEWER

You had your B.A. from the University of Chicago at eighteen. Did you know by then you would become a

writer?

SONTAG

Yes, but I still went to graduate school. It never occurred to me that I could support myself as a writer. I was a grateful, militant student. I thought I would be happy teaching, and I was. Of course, I had been careful to prepare myself to teach not literature but philosophy and the history of religion.

INTERVIEWER

But you taught only through your twenties, and have refused countless invitations to return to university teaching. Is this because you came to feel that being an academic and being a creative writer are incompatible?

SONTAG

Yes. Worse than incompatible. I've seen academic life destroy the best writers of my generation.

INTERVIEWER

Do you mind being called an intellectual?

SONTAG

Well, one never likes to be called anything. And the word makes more sense to me as an adjective than as a noun, though, even so, I suppose there will always be a presumption of graceless oddity—especially if one is a woman. Which makes me even more committed to my polemics against the ruling anti-intellectual clichés—heart versus head, feeling versus intellect, and so forth.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think of yourself as a feminist?

SONTAG

That's one of the few labels I'm content with. But even so . . . is it a noun? I doubt it.

INTERVIEWER

What women writers have been important to you?

SONTAG

Many. Sei Shonagon, Austen, George Eliot, Dickinson, Woolf, Tsvetayeva, Akhmatova, Elizabeth Bishop, Elizabeth Hardwick . . . the list is much longer than that. Because women are, culturally speaking, a minority, with my minority consciousness I always rejoice in the achievement of women. With my writer's consciousness, I rejoice in any writer I can admire, women writers no more or less than men.

INTERVIEWER

Whatever the models of a literary vocation that inspired you as a child, I have the impression that your adult idea of a literary vocation is more European than American.

SONTAG

I'm not so sure. I think it's my own private brand. But what is true is that living in the second half of the twentieth century, I could indulge my Europhile tastes without actually expatriating myself, while still spending a lot of my

adult life in Europe. That's been my way of being an American. As Gertrude Stein remarked, "What good are roots if you can't take them with you?" One might say that's very Jewish, but it's also very American.

INTERVIEWER

Your third novel, *The Volcano Lover*, seems to me a very American book, even though the story it tells takes place in eighteenth-century Europe.

SONTAG

It is. Nobody but an American would have written *The Volcano Lover*.

INTERVIEWER

And *The Volcano Lover*'s subtitle: "A Romance." That's a reference to Hawthorne, right?

SONTAG

Exactly. I was thinking of what Hawthorne says in the preface to *The House of Seven Gables*: "When a writer calls his work a romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume had he been writing a novel." My imagination is very marked by nineteenth-century American literature—first by Poe, whom I read at a precocious age and whose mixture of speculativeness, fantasy, and gloominess enthralled me. Poe's stories still inhabit my head. Then by Hawthorne and Melville. I love Melville's obsessiveness.

Clarel, *Moby-Dick*. And *Pierre*—another novel about the terrible thwarting of a heroic solitary writer.

INTERVIEWER

Your first book was a novel, *The Benefactor*. Since then you've written essays, travel narratives, stories, plays, as well as two more novels. Have you ever started something in one form and then changed it to another?

SONTAG

No. From the beginning I always know what something is going to be; every impulse to write is born of an idea of form, for me. To begin I have to have the shape, the architecture. I can't say it better than Nabokov did: "The pattern of the thing precedes the thing."

INTERVIEWER

How fluent are you as a writer?

SONTAG

I wrote *The Benefactor* quickly, almost effortlessly, on weekends and during two summers (I was teaching in the department of religion at Columbia College); I thought I was telling a pleasurably sinister story that illustrated the fortune of certain heretical religious ideas that go by the name of Gnosticism. The early essays came easily too. But writing is an activity that in my experience doesn't get easier with practice. On the contrary.

INTERVIEWER

How does something get started for you?

SONTAG

It starts with sentences, with phrases, and then I know something is being transmitted. Often it's an opening line. But sometimes I hear the closing line, instead.

INTERVIEWER

How do you actually write?

SONTAG

I write with a felt-tip pen, or sometimes a pencil, on yellow or white legal pads, that fetish of American writers. I like the slowness of writing by hand. Then I type it up and scrawl all over that. And keep on retyping it, each time making corrections both by hand and directly on the typewriter, until I don't see how to make it any better. Up to five years ago, that was it. Since then there is a computer in my life. After the second or third draft it goes into the computer, so I don't retype the whole manuscript anymore, but continue to revise by hand on a succession of hard-copy drafts from the computer.

INTERVIEWER

Is there anything that helps you get started writing?

SONTAG

Reading—which is rarely related to what I'm writing, or hoping to write. I read a lot of art history, architectural history, musicology, academic books on many subjects. And

poetry. Getting started is partly stalling, stalling by way of reading and of listening to music, which energizes me and also makes me restless. Feeling guilty about *not* writing.

INTERVIEWER

Do you write every day?

SONTAG

No. I write in spurts. I write when I have to because the pressure builds up and I feel enough confidence that something has matured in my head and I can write it down. But once something is really under way, I don't want to do anything else. I don't go out, much of the time I forget to eat, I sleep very little. It's a very undisciplined way of working and makes me not very prolific. But I'm too interested in many other things.

INTERVIEWER

Yeats said famously that one must choose between the life and the work. Do you think that is true?

SONTAG

As you know, he actually said that one must choose between perfection of the life and perfection of the work. Well, writing *is* a life—a very peculiar one. Of course, if by life you mean life with other people, Yeats's dictum is true. Writing requires huge amounts of solitude. What I've done to soften the harshness of that choice is that I don't write all the time. I like to go out—which includes traveling; I can't write when I travel. I like to talk. I like to listen. I like to

look and to watch. Maybe I have an Attention Surplus Disorder. The easiest thing in the world for me is to pay attention.

INTERVIEWER

Do you revise as you go along or do you wait until you have an entire draft and then revise the whole thing?

SONTAG

I revise as I go along. And that's quite a pleasurable task. I don't get impatient and I'm willing to go over and over something until it works. It's beginnings that are hard. I always begin with a great sense of dread and trepidation. Nietzsche says that the decision to start writing is like leaping into a cold lake. Only when I'm about a third of the way can I tell if it's good enough. Then I have my cards, and I can play my hand.

INTERVIEWER

Is there a difference between writing fiction and writing essays?

SONTAG

Writing essays has always been laborious. They go through many drafts, and the end result may bear little relation to the first draft; often I completely change my mind in the course of writing an essay. Fiction comes much easier, in the sense that the first draft contains the essentials—tone, lexicon, velocity, passions—of what I eventually end up with.

INTERVIEWER

Do you regret anything you've written?

SONTAG

Nothing in its entirety except two theater chronicles I did in the mid-1960s for *Partisan Review*, and unfortunately included in the first collection of essays, *Against Interpretation*—I'm not suited for that kind of pugnacious, impressionistic task. Obviously, I don't agree with everything in the early essays. I've changed, and I know more. And the cultural context that inspired them has altogether changed. But there would be no point in modifying them now. I think I would like to take a blue pencil to the first two novels, though.

INTERVIEWER

The Benefactor, which you wrote in your late twenties, is narrated in the voice of a Frenchman in his sixties. Did you find it easy to impersonate someone so different from yourself?

SONTAG

Easier than writing about myself. But writing is impersonation. Even when I write about events in my own life, as I did in "Pilgrimage" and "Project for a Trip to China," it's not really me. But I admit that, with *The Benefactor*, the difference was as broad as I could make it. I wasn't celibate, I wasn't a recluse, I wasn't a man, I wasn't elderly, I wasn't French.

INTERVIEWER

But the novel seems very influenced by French literature.

SONTAG

Is it? It seems many people think that it was influenced by the *nouveau roman*. But I don't agree. There were ironic allusions to two French books, hardly contemporary ones: Descartes's *Meditations* and Voltaire's *Candide*. But those weren't influences. If there was an influence on *The Benefactor*, though one I wasn't at all conscious of at the time, it was Kenneth Burke's *Towards a Better Life*. I reread Burke's novel recently, after many decades (I may never have reread it since he gave me a copy when I was sixteen), and discovered in its programmatic preface what seems like a model for *The Benefactor*. The novel as sequence of arias and fictive moralizing. The coquetry of a protagonist—Burke dared to call his the novel's hero—so ingeniously self-absorbed that no reader could be tempted to identify with him.

INTERVIEWER

Your second novel, *Death Kit*, is quite different from *The Benefactor*.

SONTAG

Death Kit invites identification with its miserable protagonist. I was in the lamenting mood—it's written in the shadow of the Vietnam war. It's a book of grief, veils and all.

INTERVIEWER

Hardly a new emotion in your work. Wasn't your first published story entitled "Man with a Pain"?

SONTAG

Juvenilia. You won't find it in *I, etcetera*.

INTERVIEWER

How did you come to write those theater chronicles for *Partisan Review*?

SONTAG

Well, you have to understand that the literary world then was defined by so-called small magazines—hard to imagine because it's so different now. My sense of literary vocation had been shaped by reading literary magazines—*Kenyon Review*, *Sewanee Review*, *The Hudson Review*, *Partisan Review*—at the end of the 1940s, while still in high school in Southern California. By the time I came to New York in 1960, those magazines still existed. But it was already the end of an era. Of course, I couldn't have known that. My highest ambition had been and still was to publish in one of these magazines, where five thousand people would read me. That seemed to me very heaven.

Soon after I moved to New York, I saw William Phillips at a party and got up my nerve to go over and ask him, How does one get to write for *Partisan Review*? He answered, You come down to the magazine and I give you a book to review on spec. I was there the next day. And he gave me a novel. Not one I was interested in, but I wrote something

decent, and the review was printed. And so the door was opened. But then there was some inappropriate fantasy, which I tried to squelch, that I was going to be "the new Mary McCarthy"—as Phillips made plain to me by asking me to do a theater chronicle. You know, Mary used to do it, he said. I told him I didn't want to write theater reviews. He insisted. And so, much against my better judgment (I certainly had no desire to be the new Mary McCarthy, a writer who'd never mattered to me), I did turn out two of them. I reviewed plays by Arthur Miller and James Baldwin and Edward Albee and said they were bad and tried to be witty and hated myself for doing it. After the second round I told Phillips I couldn't go on.

INTERVIEWER

But you did go on and write those famous essays, some of which were published in *Partisan Review*.

SONTAG

Yes, but those subjects were all of my own choosing. I've hardly ever written anything on commission. I am not at all interested in writing about work I don't admire. And even among what I've admired, by and large I've written only about things I felt were neglected or relatively unknown. I am not a critic, which is something else than an essayist; I thought of my essays as cultural work. They were written out of a sense of what *needed* to be written.

I was assuming that a principal task of art was to strengthen the adversarial consciousness. And that led me to reach for relatively eccentric work. I took for granted that the liberal consensus about culture—I was and am a

great admirer of Lionel Trilling—would stay in place, that the traditional canon of great books could not be threatened by work that was more transgressive or playful. But taste has become so debauched in the thirty years I've been writing that now simply to defend the idea of seriousness has become an adversarial act. Just to be serious or to care about things in an ardent, disinterested way is becoming incomprehensible to most people. Perhaps only those who were born in the 1930s—and maybe a few stragglers—are going to understand what it means to talk about art as opposed to art projects. Or artists as opposed to celebrities. As you see, I'm chock-full of indignation about the barbarism and relentless vacuity of this culture. How tedious always to be indignant.

INTERVIEWER

Is it old-fashioned to think that the purpose of literature is to educate us about life?

SONTAG

Well, it does educate us about life. I wouldn't be the person I am, I wouldn't understand what I understand, were it not for certain books. I'm thinking of the great question of nineteenth-century Russian literature: how should one live? A novel worth reading is an education of the heart. It enlarges your sense of human possibility, of what human nature is, of what happens in the world. It's a creator of inwardness.

INTERVIEWER

Do writing an essay and writing a piece of fiction come from different parts of yourself?

SONTAG

Yes. The essay is a constrained form. Fiction is freedom. Freedom to tell stories and freedom to be discursive, too. But essayistic discursiveness, in the context of fiction, has an entirely different meaning. It is always voiced.

INTERVIEWER

It seems as if you have pretty much stopped writing essays.

SONTAG

I have. And most of the essays I've succumbed to writing in the past fifteen years are requiems or tributes. The essays on Canetti, Barthes, and Benjamin are about elements in their work and sensibility that I feel close to: Canetti's cult of admiration and hatred of cruelty, Barthes's version of the aesthete's sensibility, Benjamin's poetics of melancholy. I was very aware that there's much to be said about them that I didn't say.

INTERVIEWER

Yes, I can see that those essays are disguised self-portraits. But weren't you doing much the same thing in early essays, including some of those in *Against Interpretation*?

SONTAG

I suppose it can't be helped that it all hangs together. Still, something else was going on in the essays that went into the

last collection, *Under the Sign of Saturn*. I was having a kind of slow-motion, asymptomatic nervous breakdown writing essays. I was so full of feeling and ideas and fantasies that I was still trying to cram into the essay mode. In other words, I'd come to the end of what the essay form could do for me. Maybe the essays on Benjamin, Canetti, and Barthes were self-portraits, but they were also really fictions. My volcano lover, the Cavaliere, is the fully realized fictional form of what I'd been trying to say, in an impacted way, in the essay-portraits of Canetti and Benjamin.

INTERVIEWER

Writing fiction, is your experience one of inventing or figuring out a plot?

SONTAG

Oddly enough, the plot is what seems to come all of a piece —like a gift. It's very mysterious. Something I hear or see or read conjures up a whole story in all its concreteness— scenes, characters, landscapes, catastrophes. With *Death Kit*, it was hearing someone utter the childhood nickname of a mutual friend named Richard—just the hearing of the name Diddy. With *The Volcano Lover*, it was browsing in a print shop near the British Museum and coming across some images of volcanic landscapes that turned out to be from Sir William Hamilton's *Phlegraei Campi*. For the new novel, it was reading something in Kafka's diaries, a favorite book, so I must have already read this paragraph, which may be an account of a dream, more than once. Reading it this time the story of a whole novel, like a movie I'd seen, leaped into my head.

INTERVIEWER

The whole story?

SONTAG

Yes, the whole story. The plot. But what the story can carry or accumulate—*that* I discover in the writing. If *The Volcano Lover* starts in a flea market and ends with Eleonora's beyond-the-grave monologue, it isn't as if I knew before I started writing all the implications of that journey, which goes from an ironic, down-market vignette of a collector on the prowl to Eleonora's moral wide-shot view of the whole story that the reader has experienced. Ending with Eleonora, and her denunciation of the protagonists, is as far as you can get from the point of view with which the novel starts.

INTERVIEWER

At the beginning of your legendary essay "Notes on Camp," which appeared in 1964, you wrote that your attitude was one of "deep sympathy modified by revulsion." This seems a typical attitude of yours: Both yes and no to camp. Both yes and no to photography. Both yes and no to narrative . . .

SONTAG

It isn't that I like it and I don't like it—that's too simple. Or, if you will, it isn't "both yes and no." It's "this but also that." I'd love to settle in on a strong feeling or reaction. But, having seen whatever I see, my mind keeps on going and I see something else. It's that I quickly see the limitations of whatever I say or whatever judgment I make about

anything. There's a wonderful remark of Henry James: "Nothing is my last word on anything." There's always more to be said, more to be felt.

INTERVIEWER

I think most people might imagine that you bring some theoretical agenda to fiction—if not as a writer of novels, at least as a reader of them.

SONTAG

But I don't. I need to care about and be touched by what I read. I can't care about a book that has nothing to contribute to the wisdom project. And I'm a sucker for a fancy prose style. To put it less giddily, my model for prose is poet's prose; many of the writers I most admire were poets when young or could have been poets. Nothing theoretical in all that. In fact, my taste is irrepressibly catholic. I shouldn't care to be prevented from doting on Dreiser's *Jennie Gerhardt* and Didion's *Democracy*, Glenway Wescott's *The Pilgrim Hawk* and Donald Barthelme's *The Dead Father*.

INTERVIEWER

You're mentioning a number of contemporaries you admire. Would you also say you've been influenced by them?

SONTAG

Whenever I avow to being influenced, I'm never sure I'm telling the truth. But here goes. I think I learned a lot about

punctuation and speed from Donald Barthelme, about adjectives and sentence rhythms from Elizabeth Hardwick. I don't know if I learned from Nabokov and Thomas Bernhard, but their incomparable books help me keep my standards for myself as severe as they ought to be. And Godard—Godard has been a major nourishment to my sensibility and therefore, inevitably, to my writing. And I've certainly learned something as a writer from the way Schnabel plays Beethoven, Glenn Gould plays Bach, and Mitsuko Uchida plays Mozart.

INTERVIEWER

Do you read the reviews of your work?

SONTAG

No. Not even those I'm told are entirely favorable. All reviews upset me. But friends give me a certain thumbs-up, thumbs-down sense of what they are.

INTERVIEWER

After *Death Kit* you didn't write much for a few years.

SONTAG

I'd been very active in the antiwar movement since 1964, when it couldn't yet be called a movement. And that took up more and more time. I got depressed. I waited. I read. I lived in Europe. I fell in love. My admirations evolved. I made some movies. I had a crisis of confidence of how to write because I've always thought that a book should be something necessary, and that each book by me should be

better than the one before. Punishing standards, but I'm quite loyal to them.

INTERVIEWER

How did you come to write *On Photography*?

SONTAG

I was having lunch with Barbara Epstein of *The New York Review of Books* in early 1972 and going on about the Diane Arbus show at the Museum of Modern Art, which I'd just seen, and she said, "Why don't you write a piece about the show?" I thought that maybe I could. And then when I began writing it I thought that it should start with a few paragraphs about photography in general and then move to Arbus. And soon there was a lot more than a few paragraphs, and I couldn't extricate myself. The essays multiplied—I felt often like the hapless sorcerer's apprentice—and they got harder and harder to write, I mean, to get right. But I'm stubborn—I was on the third essay before I managed to place some paragraphs about Arbus and the show—and, feeling I'd committed myself, wouldn't give up. It took five years to write the six essays that make up *On Photography*.

INTERVIEWER

But you told me that you wrote your next book, *Illness as Metaphor*, very fast.

SONTAG

Well, it's shorter. One long essay, the nonfiction equivalent

of a novella. And being ill—while writing it I was a cancer patient with a gloomy prognosis—was certainly very focusing. It gave me energy to think I was writing a book that would be helpful to other cancer patients and those close to them.

INTERVIEWER

All along you'd been writing stories . . .

SONTAG

Revving up for a novel.

INTERVIEWER

Soon after finishing *The Volcano Lover* you started another novel. Does that mean that you're more drawn to longer, rather than shorter, forms of fiction?

SONTAG

Yes. There are a few of my stories which I like a lot—from *I, etcetera*, "Debriefing" and "Unguided Tour," and "The Way We Live Now," which I wrote in 1987. But I feel more drawn to polyphonic narratives, which need to be long—or longish.

INTERVIEWER

How much time did it take you to write *The Volcano Lover*?

SONTAG

From the first sentence of the first draft to the galleys, two

and a half years. For me that's fast.

INTERVIEWER

Where were you?

SONTAG

I started *The Volcano Lover* in September 1989 in Berlin, where I had gone to hang out thinking that I was going to a place that was both very isolated and the Berkeley of Central Europe. Although only two months after I arrived Berlin had started to become a very different place, it still retained its main advantages for me—I wasn't in my apartment in New York with all my books, and I wasn't in the place that I was writing about either. That sort of double distancing works very well for me.

About half of *The Volcano Lover* was written between late 1989 and the end of 1990 in Berlin. The second half was written in my apartment in New York, except for two chapters that I wrote in a hotel room in Milan (a two-week escapade) and another chapter that I wrote in the Mayflower Hotel in New York. That was the Cavaliere's deathbed interior monologue, which I thought I had to write in one go, in complete isolation, and knew—I don't know how I knew—that I could do in three days. So I left my apartment and checked into the hotel with my typewriter and legal-sized pads and felt-tip pens, and ordered up BLTs until I was done.

INTERVIEWER

Did you write the novel in sequence?

SONTAG

Yes. I write chapter by chapter and I don't go on to the next chapter until the one I'm working on is in final form. That was frustrating at first because from the beginning I knew much of what I wanted the characters to say in the final monologues, but I feared that if I wrote them early on I wouldn't be able to go back to the middle. I was also afraid that maybe by the time I got to it I would have forgotten some of the ideas or no longer be connected to those feelings. The first chapter, which is about fourteen typewritten pages, took me four months to write. The last five chapters, some one hundred typewritten pages, took me two weeks.

INTERVIEWER

How much of the book did you have in mind before you started?

SONTAG

I had the title; I can't write something unless I already know its title. I had the dedication; I knew I would dedicate it to my son. I had the *Così fan tutte* epigraph. And of course I had the story in some sense, and the span of the book. And what was most helpful, I had a very strong idea of a structure. I took it from a piece of music, Hindemith's *The Four Temperaments*—a work I know very well, since it's the music of one of Balanchine's most sublime ballets, which I've seen countless times. The Hindemith starts with a triple prologue, three very short pieces. Then come four movements—melancholic, sanguinic, phlegmatic, choleric.

In that order. I knew I was going to have a triple prologue and then four sections or parts corresponding to the four temperaments—though I saw no reason to belabor the idea by actually labeling Parts I to IV "melancholic," "sanguinic," etcetera. I knew all of that, plus the novel's last sentence: "Damn them all." Of course, I didn't know who was going to utter it. In a sense, the whole work of writing the novel consisted of making something that would justify that sentence.

INTERVIEWER

That sounds like a lot to know before beginning.

SONTAG

Yes, but for all that I knew about it, I still didn't understand all that it could be. I started off thinking that *The Volcano Lover* was the story of the volcano lover, Sir William Hamilton, the man I call the Cavaliere; that the book would stay centered on him. And I was going to develop the character of the self-effacing first Lady Hamilton, Catherine, at the expense of the story of his second wife, which everyone knows. I knew her story and the relation with Nelson had to figure in the novel, but I intended to keep it in the background. The triple prologue and Part I, with its many variations on the theme of melancholy (or depression, as we call it)—the melancholy of the collector, the ecstatic sublimation of that melancholy—all that went as planned. Part I never leaves the Cavaliere. But then, when I started Part II—which was to have variations on the theme of blood, from the sanguinic Emma, this person bursting with energy and vitality, to the literal blood of the

Neapolitan revolution—Emma kidnapped the book. And that permitted the novel to open out (the chapters got longer and longer) into a furor of storytelling and of reflections about justice, war and cruelty. That was the end of the main narrative, told in the third person. The rest of the novel was to be in the first person. A very short Part III; the Cavaliere—delirious, "phlegmatic"—enacts, in words, his dying. That went exactly as I'd imagined it, but then I was back in the Cavaliere-centered world of Part I. There were more surprises for me when I came to write the monologues of Part IV, "choleric"—women, angry women, speaking from beyond the grave.

INTERVIEWER

Why beyond the grave?

SONTAG

A supplementary fiction, making it more plausible that they are speaking with such insistent, heartfelt, heartbreaking truthfulness. My equivalent of the unmediated, acutely rueful directness of an operatic aria. And how could I resist the challenge of ending each monologue with the character describing her own death?

INTERVIEWER

Were they always going to be all women?

SONTAG

Yes, definitely. I always knew the book would end with women's voices, the voices of some of the women

characters in the book, who would finally have their say.

INTERVIEWER

And give the woman's point of view.

SONTAG

Well, you're assuming that there is a woman's, or a female, point of view. I don't. Your question reminds me that, whatever their numbers, women are always regarded, are culturally constructed, as a minority. It's to minorities that we impute having a unitary point of view. Lord, what do women want? Etcetera. Had I ended the novel with the voices of four men, no one would suppose I was giving the male point of view; the differences among the four voices would be too striking. These women are as different from each other as any of four men characters in the novel I might have chosen. Each retells the story (or part of it) already known to the reader from her own point of view. Each has a truth to tell.

INTERVIEWER

Do they have anything in common?

SONTAG

Of course. They all know, in different ways, that the world is run by men. So, with respect to the great public events that have touched their lives, they have the insight of the disenfranchised to contribute. But they don't speak only about public events.

INTERVIEWER

Did you know who the women would be?

SONTAG

I knew pretty soon that the first three beyond-the-grave monologues would be by Catherine, Emma's mother, and Emma. But I was already in the middle of writing Part II, Chapter 6 and boning up on the Neapolitan Revolution of 1799, before I found the speaker of the fourth and last monologue—Eleonora de Fonseca Pimentel, who makes a brief appearance toward the end of that chapter, the narrative climax of the novel. And, finding her, I finally understood the unwrapped gift of that last line, which I'd heard in my head before I'd even started writing—that hers would be the voice that had the right to utter it. The events, public and private, of her life, as well as her atrocious death, follow the historical record, but her principles—her ethical ardor—are the novelist's invention. While I'd felt sympathy for the characters in *The Benefactor* and *Death Kit*, what I feel for the characters in *The Volcano Lover* is love (I had to borrow a stage villain, Scarpia, to have one character in *The Volcano Lover* I didn't love). But I can live with their becoming small at the end. I mean, it *is* the end of the novel. I was thinking in cinematic terms as I did throughout Part II, Chapter 6. Remember how so many French films of the early 1960s ended with the camera in long shot starting to pull back, and the character moving further and further into the rear of the pictured space, becoming smaller and smaller as the credits start to roll. Seen in the ethical wide shot that Eleonora de Fonseca Pimentel provides, Nelson and the Cavaliere and Emma should be judged as harshly as

she judges them. Although they do end badly in one way or another, they are extremely privileged, they're still winners—except for poor Emma, and even she has quite a ride for a while. The last word should be given to someone who speaks for victims.

INTERVIEWER

There are so many voices—stories and substories.

SONTAG

Until the late 1980s most of what I did in fiction was going on inside a single consciousness, whether it was actually in the first person like *The Benefactor* or nominally in the third person like *Death Kit*. Until *The Volcano Lover*, I wasn't able to give myself permission to tell a story, a real story, as opposed to the adventures of somebody's consciousness. The key was this structure that I borrowed from the Hindemith composition. I'd had the idea for a long time that my third novel was going to have the title "The Anatomy of Melancholy." But I was resisting it—I don't mean fiction, but *that* novel, whose story hadn't yet been given to me. But it's obvious to me now that I didn't really want to write it. I mean a book written under the aegis of that title, which is just another way of saying "under the sign of Saturn." Most of my work had projected only one of the old temperaments—melancholy. I didn't want to write just about melancholy. The musical structure, with its arbitrary order, freed me. Now I could do all four.

With *The Volcano Lover* the door opened and I have a wider entry. That's the great struggle, for more access and more expressiveness, isn't it? You don't—I'm adapting a

phrase of Philip Larkin—write the novels you really want to write. But I think I'm coming closer.

INTERVIEWER

It seems as if some of your essayistic impulses are also part of the novel's form.

SONTAG

I suppose it's true that if you strung together all the passages about collecting in *The Volcano Lover* you'd have a discontinuous, aphoristic essay that might well stand on its own. Still, the degree of essayistic speculation in *The Volcano Lover* seems restrained if compared with a central tradition of the European novel. Think of Balzac and Tolstoy and Proust, who go on for pages and pages that could really be excerpted as essays. Or *The Magic Mountain*, perhaps the thinkiest great novel of all. But speculation, rumination, direct address to the reader are entirely indigenous to the novel form. The novel is a big boat. It's not so much that I was able to salvage the banished essayist in myself. It's that the essayist in me was only part of the novelist I've finally given myself permission to be.

INTERVIEWER

Did you have to do a lot of research?

SONTAG

You mean reading? Yes, some. The me who is a self-defrocked academic found that part of writing a novel set in the past very pleasurable.

INTERVIEWER

Why set a novel in the past?

SONTAG

To escape the inhibitions connected with my sense of the contemporary, my sense of how degraded and debased the way we live and feel and think is now. The past is bigger than the present. Of course, the present is always there too. The narrating voice of *The Volcano Lover* is very much of the late twentieth century, driven by late-twentieth-century concerns. It was never my idea to write a "you are there" historical novel, even while it was a matter of honor to make the historical substance of the novel as dense and accurate as I could. It felt even more spacious that way. But having decided to give myself one more romp in the past—with "In America," the novel I'm writing now—I'm not sure it will work out the same way this time.

INTERVIEWER

When is it set?

SONTAG

From the mid-1870s almost to the end of the nineteenth century. And, like *The Volcano Lover*, it's based on a real story, that of a celebrated Polish actress and her entourage who left Poland and went to Southern California to create a Utopian community. The attitudes of my principal characters are wonderfully exotic to me—Victorian, if you will. But the America they arrive in is not so exotic, though I'd thought that to set a book in late-nineteenth-century

America would feel almost as remote as late-eighteenth-century Naples and London. It's not. There is an astonishing continuity of cultural attitudes in our country. I never cease to be surprised that the America Tocqueville observed in the early 1830s is, in most respects, recognizably the America of the end of the twentieth century—even though the demographic and ethnographic composition of the country has totally changed. It's as if you had changed both the blade and handle of a knife and it is still the same knife.

INTERVIEWER

Your play, *Alice in Bed*, is also about a late-nineteenth-century sensibility.

SONTAG

Yes—Alice James plus the nineteenth century's most famous Alice, Lewis Carroll's. I was directing a production of Pirandello's *As You Desire Me* in Italy, and one day Adriana Asti, who played the lead, said to me—dare I say it?—playfully, Please write a play for me. And remember, I have to be onstage all the time. And then Alice James, thwarted writer and professional invalid, fell into my head, and I made up the play on the spot and told it to Adriana. But I didn't write it for another ten years.

INTERVIEWER

Are you going to write more plays? You've always been very involved with theater.

SONTAG

Yes. I hear voices. That's why I like to write plays. And I've lived in the world of theater artists for much of my life. When I was very young, acting was the only way I knew how to insert myself into what happens on a stage: starting at ten, I was taken on for some kiddie roles in Broadway plays put on by a community theater (this was in Tucson); I was active in student theater—Sophocles, Shakespeare—at the University of Chicago; and in my early twenties did a bit of summer stock. Then I stopped. I'd much rather direct plays (though not my own). And make films (I hope to make better ones than the four I wrote and directed in Sweden, Israel, and Italy in the 1970s and early 1980s). And direct operas, which I haven't done yet. I'm very drawn to opera—the art form that most regularly and predictably produces ecstasy (at least in this opera lover). Opera is one of the inspirations of *The Volcano Lover*—stories from operas and operatic emotions.

INTERVIEWER

Does literature produce ecstasy?

SONTAG

Sure, but less reliably than music and dance; literature has more on its mind. One must be strict with books. I want to read only what I'll want to reread—the definition of a book worth reading once.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever go back and reread your work?

SONTAG

Except to check translations, no. Definitely no. I'm not curious. I'm not attached to the work I've already done. Also, perhaps I don't want to see how it's all the same. Maybe I'm always reluctant to reread anything I wrote more than ten years ago because it would destroy my illusion of endless new beginnings. That's the most American part of me: I feel that it's always a new start.

INTERVIEWER

But your work is so diverse.

SONTAG

Well it's supposed to be diverse, though of course there is a unity of temperament, of preoccupation—certain predicaments, certain emotions that recur—ardor and melancholy. And an obsessive concern with human cruelty, whether cruelty in personal relations or the cruelty of war.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think your best work is still to come?

SONTAG

I hope so. Or . . . yes.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think much about the audience for your books?

SONTAG

Don’t dare. Don’t want to. But, anyway, I don’t write because there’s an audience. I write because there is literature.