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Literature Is What You Should Re-Read: An Interview With Susan Sontag

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(We interviewed Susan Sontag in Sarajevo on April 10, 1993, during her first visit to the Bosnian capital under siege. We sat on plastic chairs in front of the main entrance of a building whose overarching mass gave us some sense of security from the Serb gunners on the mountain beyond. But it was an unusually quiet spell in the city: the tape in the recorder did not capture a single explosion.)

Omer Hadžiselimović: Ms. Sontag, allow us to ask you the inevitable question: What made you come to Sarajevo at this moment, in April of 1993?

Susan Sontag: Since the beginning of the war, a year ago, I have been appalled and horrified and overwhelmed with sadness at the cruelty, injustice of this situation, what has happened in the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the result of the Serb aggression, the Chetnik aggression. However, I did not feel that there was any point or any use in my coming here because I did not know what I could do. And, although I'm an American and my family has been in America for many generations, I'm in my own mentality, my work, and my way of thinking been very Europeanized: I've spent about half of my adult life in Europe, so the situation was very real to me, in my mind. Also, I was a tourist a number of times in the former Yugoslavia; I came to an important literary congress more than twenty-five years ago, the International PEN Congress that was held in Slovenia, in Bled, I think in 1966 or 1967. But, feeling all these emotions I still did not understand what use would be served to come to Bosnia and Herzegovina now and specifically to come to Sarajevo. I was not afraid of the danger of coming here; I'm all too well aware that any foreign visitor is very privileged and very protected and very comfortable compared to the enormous suffering and privation of people who live here, without electricity, without food, without water, without fuel during this terrible winter. So, I ask myself again and again, why should I come. I don't want to be a tourist—it's not, for me, enough to make a symbolic visit because then it seems it's more about me than about you, the people of Sarajevo and the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina. So that is why I didn't come before. But, as it happens, I answer your question very concretely: I have a son, who is a writer and journalist, and he began coming here in September of last year and I made the trip with him now, in April. He is completely obsessed with the situation here; he has already written an important article about it in a very important American magazine, The New Yorker. He's writing a book about the war. It's really because he encouraged

me to come. I didn't not come before because I was afraid, I didn't not come because I wasn't interested. I didn't not come before because I didn't know what's the use of it. I'm not interested in people saying, "Oh, Susan Sontag was in Sarajevo." It's nothing to me—I'm not making my career being a noble person. I couldn't justify it to myself unless I thought there was some use to it, use to you, the people of Sarajevo, the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina. And he said, "Well, you just should go. It'll be an important experience and you'll make use of human contact, and you'll learn, and you'll see." But I think if David Rieff had not encouraged me, I would not have come. I mean, I'm really the opposite of the people like Levy [Bernard-Henri Levy] and Glucksman [André Glucksman]; I don't want to come here to make something for myself—I want to come here only if I thought I could be of some use. And I'm still extremely troubled by that question—how I can be of use to you—because, of course, I can write ... but my son David Rieff is already going to write a book and he is passionately committed to your cause and to describing what is going on here. But I'm not going to write a book because I think in this family business there must be a division of labor—he writes the book. But of course I will speak in public and talk to people and go on television and maybe write a little article for The New York Times. Ça va sans dire—that goes without saying. But for me it's not enough. I'm trying all the time to understand how I can be more useful.

Zvonimir Radeljković: Twenty years ago, in an interview with Joe David Bellamy, you described yourself as a writer of fiction and a filmmaker. How would you describe yourself today?

S. Sontag: Well, you know, interviews are a very curious business, including this interview we are having now. One makes all these statements because one is asked certain questions. I have said things in interviews I would never say by myself. I only say them because people ask certain questions. Then I answer and very often the question is suppressed, so then it looks as if I come to make a statement; in fact, I don't come to make this statement at all; I'm just being polite answering the question. I remember sometime ago, years ago, they made an interview with me in Paris at a very important weekly magazine called *Le Nouvel Observateur*, and the interview went on for about two hours—and, you know, you get very lazy in interviews and you say, this is a very nice person, and you forget this is an interview, and you start speaking a little indiscreetly—so this interviewer (and he knew that I had lived in Paris for many years) said to me, "Well, after all, Susan Sontag, Paris is not so interesting as it was when you lived here." And I said, "Oh, it's very interesting, yes, of course." "But it's not the great time of Sartre and bla bla bla bla bla. It's not so interesting as it was." And I said, "Well, yes, I suppose so." Then the headline of the article was "American Intellectual Says Paris is no Longer Interesting." You know, I did not come to say this; this was pulled out of me by the interviewer. You know this process; the question then is eliminated and it looks as if I'm coming to say Paris is not interesting.

Z.R.: We promise we won't to any such thing. The title will be neutral.

S. Sontag: Yes ... it's the same way with the Joe David Bellamy interview. I mean, I define myself as a writer. Period. It happens that now, at this point of my life, as I said this morning [at the University of Sarajevo], the writing of fiction, which was my first love, is the most important to me. I have finished this big novel, *The Volcano Lover*,

and now the only thing that interests me is my new novel—and Sarajevo. So, I've started another novel, but of course now there's this event—what is happening to you. And since I also think I belong to that tradition of writers who believe that to be a writer is to pay attention to the world and to champion the cause of justice, to be in a position of opposition. It is certainly a duty to bear witness in writing and in other forms, to what is going on here. But I don't fool myself about what most writers are. Most writers are conformists; most writers are servants of the state or some dominant ideology. And some writers are vicious propagandists for evil ideas, like Mr. [Edouard] Limonov, who was up on the hills, shooting down at you, as we know from this film footage. So, one mustn't idealize writers; I mean, there are, as they say in French, *il ya les uns et les autres*. There are some people like that and there are other people. And even if I think to myself, suppose I could pick up the phone and call Günther Grass, or call Milan Kundera, or Umberto Eco, or any of these world-famous writers like I am, and I know these people—we're not close friends, but I know these people socially and I have their telephone numbers. If I were to pick up the phone and say, "Come to Sarajevo," I don't know if they would come. And—even if they came—I do not know that they would not disappoint you.

O.H.: How about Kurt Vonnegut? Do you know him?

S. Sontag: Yes, I know everybody. I'm so old that I know everybody. No, to take an example, Kurt Vonnegut wouldn't come. When I told my writer friends in New York about my intent—that I was coming—everyone said that I was crazy, it's very dangerous. Well, of course it's dangerous, but I said, that's like telling me the North Pole is cold! Of course I know it's dangerous. That's not a reason not to go. When people went to Spain in the 1930s, when George Orwell went to Spain in the 1930s, he knew it was dangerous—he almost died; he had a bullet in the neck. The reason they don't come, or if they do come, they disappoint you... it's much deeper, and worse; it's that there is this culture of selfishness. There is an enormous depoliticization of the Western intelligentsia, the Western writers, the writers of Western Europe and North America. You mention Kurt Vonnegut... Joseph Heller, the man who wrote *Catch -22*, he really understands the nature of war. I do know Kurt Vonnegut; I have never met Joseph Heller, but all of these people are just sitting in their huge, rich apartments and going out to the country on the weekends and living their private lives. I mean, that is the truth. I'm sorry to disillusion you, but they don't involve themselves in any political action in the United States; much less do they think to go abroad and do something serious. These people have nothing to do with anything serious. It's very, very disillusioning, and I'm sorry to say it. But they don't care; they don't have a conscience; they don't think of the writer as a witness of conscience. They don't even have this idea. I don't know anyone—do you know of anyone—who has this idea? It's very strange that the two people at the end of the year, the first anniversary of the war, who've come to visit you from the United States, are two middle-aged women who were in Hanoi twenty-five years ago: myself and Joan Baez.

O.H.: Would this have been true of Vonnegut twenty, twenty-five years ago?

S. Sontag: Yes. Absolutely, it would have been true of Vonnegut twenty-five years ago. I'm afraid you have a terrible illusion about these people. They are very selfish.

O.H.: You said, and I quote, “One becomes a writer not so much because one has something to say as because one has experienced ecstasy as a reader.” Now, what does writing mean to you: is it a need, a compulsion, a release, and which kind of writing do you enjoy most?

S. Sontag: Well, again, I make these formulas because people ask me to describe this; I never ask myself why I’m a writer and I’m not at all interested in my psychological reasons for being a writer. I’m interested in my duties as a writer... yes, of course, there are psychological reasons, but they are perfectly banal. I believe I belong to an enterprise called literature and within that enterprise called literature there are many traditions, and I associate myself with several of these traditions. I’m interested in my duty, in my obligation. One of my obligations is to write well. Another of my obligations is to preserve the language because there is a degeneration in my language, as I’m sure there is in your language because of television and commercialism and politicization. Another obligation is to tell the truth. It doesn’t matter about me personally, why I decided to be a writer—when I was a child I wanted to be a doctor—but it’s not important. All I know is that whatever I would do, whatever vocation I would assume, I know that I would not assume it in this selfish spirit. If I had become a doctor, I would have worked in a big hospital—I would not have had a private practice, sit in an office and see people coming with their silly problems and make a lot of money. No, I would have worked in a big hospital with poor people... I think whatever occupation I had I would do it in a moral spirit. So, I choose writing because it gives me a very big sphere of action and because being a famous writer I have the privilege of speaking in public and people hear what I say. I don’t mean that they’ll necessarily be changed by what I say, but I have a certain influence. But it’s not a question of compulsion; it’s actually a duty because I don’t find it easy to write—I find it very difficult. It’s very hard work when you try to get it right, when you try to do the best you can. And, of course, it at times affords me a great personal satisfaction, but I am not a writer in order to express myself. I’m not interested in self-expression; I’m interested in making something that is good and that will last. I love very much to mention the name of Danilo Kiš since I’m here, in the former Yugoslavia. I knew him very well and we had many conversations together about writing and we confessed—I never told this in public—one night, I remember, a long, late night till three in the morning, sitting in The Coupole in Paris and drinking together, and, I don’t know if he asked me or I asked him, “Do you write every day?” Because, you know, writers feel very guilty if they don’t write every day, and they believe that you are not really serious if you don’t write every day. You must get up and go to a desk and write at least a few hours every day. And we confessed to each other that neither one of us wrote every day. In fact, we went months without writing... He said, “I hate writing. I only write when I can’t stand not to write.” He said, “What I really love to do”—and now I go to the beginning of your question—“is I love to read. So, what I really love is just read all day. And I read all day, and all day, and all day, every day, every day, every day, and finally I get feeling guilty, and I feel ashamed. And it’s too much, and then I write.” So, I’m actually the same; I don’t write every day—I read every day. And then, when it’s too much, then I write.

Z.R.: Could you mention some of the formative influences that you had?

S.Sontag: There are too many. I was a very precocious reader. I actually began to read

when I was three years old, which makes me some kind of child prodigy. I'm also very slow; I think I'm in some way I very retarded. But, as far as learning skills go, I was a child prodigy, so I was reading, starting reading, probably from the age of three. I read so many books that I cannot tell you that there was one or another or another. And when I was seven years old, I started to write. My influences are all of world literature. I would say probably more European literature than American literature, by far, and of American literature, more nineteenth-century literature than twentieth-century literature.

O.H.: Which American authors from the nineteenth century do you find most readable today?

S.Sontag: We had very remarkable writers: Emerson, Hawthorne, Poe, Dickinson, Melville, Henry James. That, to me, is the great American literature, and I feel very much a child of that nineteenth-century literary tradition. But, to tell you the truth, the real, deep models of the formation of my sense of vocation as a writer were entirely European: Russian, German, French—Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Thomas Mann, Kafka, Gide. I read the Journals of Gide when I was thirteen years old and I thought that if that is what it means to be a writer, then I want to be a writer. I didn't understand the vocation from American sources but rather from European sources. But I think that I'm far more interested in nineteenth-century American literature than twentieth-century American literature. We have some writers who are really remarkable, for instance, Emerson and Poe. It's interesting to me that Nietzsche said that Emerson was one of his favorite writers, or that Baudelaire thought so well of Poe that he translated him into French. It's that period of American literature that I care about more. For instance, as a young reader, student of literature, I was never interested in either Hemingway or Faulkner, who are probably the most influential twentieth-century American writers. I still find Hemingway a rather very minor writer; though I understand his influence, it doesn't interest me. And if I have come to a limited appreciation of Faulkner, it's really through foreign writers, like Garcia Marquez, that I began to appreciate what Faulkner is; I didn't before. As for contemporary writers, living writers, in America, we have many good writers; if you take our system of grades in America, we have many B+ writers. Many, many, many . . . But I don't think we have any big, world-class A writer in the United States, including Saul Bellow, who won the Nobel Prize. I don't think we have a writer in the United States in the last forty years as good as Danilo Kiš. Many good writers, very good—Doctorow, Updike, a number of others—but I don't think we have world-class writers.

Z.R.: In your "Introduction" to *The Best American Essays 1992*, you say that you cannot take for granted that a literary culture exists. What kind of reader do you have in mind, then, when you write?

S. Sontag: Well, I don't have any reader in mind, because when I write, I have standards of mine, and my standards are from the great literature of the past. If I would imagine a reader—which I don't; I don't think that way when I write, I don't think about the reader, I think about the sentences—but if I would imagine a reader, I would say that I'm writing for somebody smarter than I am. And I think, how can I entertain this person, how can I instruct this person. The thing that I hate is the idea that you write down. The standard that I use when I'm writing is that I should not

disappoint or bore somebody who is smarter than I am— or more talented than I am. But I don't think to myself who these people are; these people are whoever reads my books.

O. H.: Do you think a novel should be more clever than its author as, I think, Conrad said?

S. Sontag: I think if it is good, it is more clever than the author. If you read Dostoevsky's novels and then you hear what Dostoevsky wrote in the way of journalism or private opinion, then the novel is better than the writer. I think the book is always better than the writer if it's a good book. Writers are often very disappointing; they put the best of themselves in their books. Once again, I want to re-emphasize that I do not think of writing as self-expression. I think that I lend myself to the book and then I'm making something better than myself. It's a question of standards, which I derive, which I take, from the literature—and other arts as well—which I admire the most. It's a question of maintaining standards; you mentioned before this remark I made in the preface to *The Best American Essays* that you can't take for granted a literary public: that's absolutely true. You can't. A book is like a message in a bottle. You don't know whom it's going to reach.

Z.R.: Yes, especially if you think about the majority of readers.

S. Sontag: Absolutely. You don't know who these people are. But I'm not willing to give up... Maybe this is the beginning of a new Dark Ages, but at least for my lifetime, I'll go on acting and working according to certain standards of the past.

O.H.: The *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, published in 1987, describes you as a critic "who has most often and most systematically edged her theory away from the criterion of objectivity and into more subjective modes of expression." Is this a fair assessment?

S. Sontag: Absolutely not. It's all nonsense, whether or not it's *The Columbia Encyclopedia* [sic]. In an earlier edition of that encyclopedia there is a different entry, which is just as ridiculous. No, these categories like "subjective" and "objective" are completely primitive. They don't apply at all. I don't acknowledge even the relevance of these descriptions. First of all, I'm not a critic. I never claimed to be a critic. I'm a writer who has written about other things—essays; I'm not a critic.

Z.R.: You mentioned that you consider that the best American writers come from the nineteenth century. Are there any modern American writers who matter to you, who are interesting and exciting to you?

S. Sontag: No. There are some writers—I mean, I don't think they are world-class writers, but they have mattered to me, I've learned something from them; they are not deep writers. It's not a question of "exciting"—it's a question of learning, that I learned from them something about how to write. I do not care and I do not respect the categories "interesting" and "exciting." I think these are trivial categories. It doesn't matter that I'm interested in something or that I'm excited by something. The question is what I can learn from them. And there are a few contemporary writers whom I learned from, learned something about language. For instance, a writer called

Donald Barthelme, or Elizabeth Hardwick, who is an older American writer, a woman in her seventies. I learned about language, about how to make sentences, where to put the comma, about adjectives. Although I like them very much and they are friends of mine (in fact, Barthelme is dead, and Hardwick is still alive), I would not say they are big, big writers. I don't think there is a major American writer now.

O.H.: Which do you think is more important for a modern or a postmodern writer: invention or research?

S. Sontag: Well, I never think in either category, so it's very hard for me to choose between them. I think that a great writer is someone who has a vision of the truth, a vision of how to construct narration—we're speaking of prose writers, not poets—how to put the most amount of material into a work; a great writer is a writer who is serious, who is ambitious formally, who is looking for new forms for narrative. I don't distinguish between invention and research. In this book of mine, this novel called *The Volcano Lover*, I did a certain amount of what might be called research. I thought about the period because it is in part a historical novel and I read a lot. I thought about the form, so you could say that is a kind of formal research. I thought a lot about this, but in the end I don't think any writer actually thinks in these categories of research or invention. The most important thing for me is to make something really big, really expressive, really eloquent, and really truthful that will move the reader, that will educate the feelings of the reader, that will teach the reader something. If I were to give a definition of literature as opposed to everything else that is written—because there are many, many, many books, of course, which are not literature—I would say that literature is what you should re-read, and no book is worth reading once if it is not worth reading twice, or three times.

Z.R.: In *On Photography*, you write about Whitman's "discredited dream of cultural revolution," and I assume it's a by-product of the American Dream.

S. Sontag: Oh, I left Whitman out of my list of nineteenth-century writers—you must put Whitman in.

Z.R.: We will. What are your feelings about the American Dream today? Is it dead, is a nightmare, does it still exist, because in Eastern and Central Europe, I think, it still does.

S. Sontag: Well, let me say first that I, who was always a dove, for the first time in my life, in late middle age, I'm a hawk. I have been opposed to every American intervention since Korea. I was seventeen years old at the beginning of the Korean War—I was against the Korean War, I was against the Vietnam War, I was against the American invasion of Panama, of Grenada, I was against the Gulf War. Now, for the first time, spending time here, in Sarajevo, with military people talking about intervention, and so on—it's a very funny situation to be in. I'm a passionate advocate of the lifting of the embargo, which will already itself involve partial intervention. It's very important that people realize here that the choice is not lifting the embargo or intervention; the two choices overlap. In order to lift the embargo and for that to be effective, there must be ground- and air support to assure the delivery of arms, because it's not as if the Serbs are just going to let the arms come through. So, even

to lift the embargo already means intervention—a limited intervention. I am a passionate advocate of American— and Western European— intervention. So much for my attitude to one aspect of my country. I'm not a supporter of American foreign policy; I'm always in the opposition—both when there was an intervention on and when there is no intervention. When you want to find out what the American government is doing, you can find out what I think, and then you know they are doing the opposite. As for the so-called American Dream: again, I'm not a patriot, I'm not a chauvinist; I despise—like Danilo Kiš—I despise all nationalisms. But there are some good things about the United States. There is an effort in the United States to make a multicultural society. That's the one good thing about the United States. But let me also remind you that countries like the United States (and I include here Canada and Australia) are what we call 'settler countries,' that is, they are countries with a very tiny native population, which of course [inaudible] killed, like the Indians of America or the Aborigines of Australia, but 98% of the population is an immigrant population. So, for us to conceive the project of unity of diverse populations—a multicultural, multinational society—is not easy, but it's easier than in Europe, where you have strong national identities, where they say, this is our territory, you are a foreigner. Everybody is a foreigner in America. I don't like the Clinton administration very much—and of course I hated the Bush administration—but at least they are committed to continue this effort to reduce conflict among different groups in America to make this multicultural society work. And it does work, somewhat, although there is great racial antagonism in the big cities because the American social system is quite unjust, and we have in America about 25% of the population that is radically, seriously poor, more poor than in Western Europe. There is real poverty in America that you don't even see in Naples, anywhere, even in Southern Europe. And this poor population is largely though not entirely black and Hispanic, so these people are a permanent criminal element; so there is a racial- and color- and class antagonism in the United States. But there is still the wish—the official policy is still very much committed, and even more so with Clinton, and so I admire Clinton for that, for making this a multiracial, multicultural, multinational society. In that sense, no, the American Dream is not dead.

O.H. : Here is our last question. In *On Photography*, you say that some photographers avoid color photographs, preferring the black-and-white technique. For them, "color belongs to painting." In another place you state that "color photographs don't age the way black-and-white photographs do... The cold intimacy of color seems to seal off the photograph from patina." This reminds me of what the British writer William Boyd says through his filmdirector hero in his novel *The New Confessions* from 1987: "Colour is modern so black and white becomes the past, the colour of history. Think of the Great War. You only know it in black and white. There are no colour photographs of the Great War yet I can assure you it was a very colourful event. Imagine it in colour—you'd have an entirely different impression of it." Would you agree with Boyd?

S. Sontag: Well, I think I know at least more about photography than Mr. Boyd, and maybe he has read my book; his book is much later. But yes, of course it's true. I wouldn't put it in that way; I think it's a little trivial the way he puts it, but yes, black and white is the past; color is the present. But twenty-five years from now, fifty years from now, will this be the same? Probably not. As the world of color continues, of course we'll have a different view. The important point in all this is the role of time,

with photographs. Old photographs become art with time; there are no bad photographs in the nineteenth century because time has conferred on them a kind of beauty and poignance. The two arts of which this is true are photography and architecture. We now feel very sentimental about a lot of beaux arts architecture and turn- of-the-century, late-nineteenth-century architecture, which was really in terribly bad taste, and people at the time thought it was awful. I don't know if anyone wrote about the National Library here when it was built—and, needless to say, I'm very sad about its destruction—but I'm sure that a sophisticated person writing about the National Library when it was built a hundred years ago would have said, this is just kitsch. Now, of course, it looks beautiful to us because it's the past; the past becomes beautiful ... The so-called nineteenth-century Gothic architecture in England—everyone thought that was kitsch. Now we think it's wonderful, because what came later was even worse.

O.H. : But that doesn't apply to literature, poetry, for instance?

S. Sontag: No, but it applies to photographs. Literature does not age. Time does not do the same to literature that it does to photography and architecture. Literature is, finally, not an object; it must be on paper, or on film, or whatever—maybe it can be even on a screen, although I would hate to read a book on a screen—but it is not an object. But photographs and architecture age in this positive way, so that the kitsch of the past is beautiful to us.

Z.R.: Thanks a lot for being so kind to answer our questions.

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