

Self Exile & Redemption in the “Artistic Utopia”: Susan Sontag’s Modern Interpretation of American Spirits

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Abstract

As a highly visible international figure for her established fame in the literary and critic circle, Susan Sontag has produced many influential works covering a wide range of fields and diverse topics, including social criticism, literary creation, cultural studies, and political critiques. Based on the study of her major work *In America*, the author of this thesis attempts to examine the relationship between the artistic self-consciousness of creative writings and the innovative contextualization of the reality in order to situate her contributions within the conception of the intellectual life in the United States. Through an in-depth analysis of Sontag’s understanding of the modern American society as presented in her historical novels, the author tries to make investigations on such subjects as American spirits, American characters and the American Dreams, of which Sontag offers a new definition in her creative writings

Keywords: American Spirit; national identity; American Dreams; Utopia

In a world in which culture and particularly religion shape the allegiances, the alliances, and the antagonisms of people on every continent, Americans could again find their national identity and their national purposes in their culture and religion.

— Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We*

The influential yet controversial American writer and critic Susan Sontag, whose writings cover a wide range of fields, including social criticism, literary creation, cultural studies, and political critiques, is reputable for her sharp insight and profound learning.

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For many critics, Sontag has become a symbol with rich intellectual, cultural, and political connotations. The standard description of this unique figure in the late 1960s, as *Partisan Review* director William Phillips noted, "is that of the up-to-date radical, a stand-in for everything advanced, extreme and outrageous" (Kennedy 1). In fact, Sontag has already been made into not one, but many symbols: "The Evangelist of the New," "Miss Camp," "The Conscience of America" and "The last Intellectual." Sontag's contribution to American cultural criticism cannot be easily prised apart from such popular conceptions. Probably "the most widely read intellectual of her generation, her critical trajectory from the early 1960s to today has been a highly public one" (Kennedy 2).

Sontag altogether published four novels, a collection of short stories, and eight works of nonfiction. She made her debut by publishing her first novel *The Benefactor* in 1963; the year envisioned the further success in her literary career with her second book, *Against Interpretation* (1966). By now her books have been translated into twenty-three languages, and often quoted by other critics dealing with subjects like photography, science fiction, disease, or pornography. However, though for several decades most of her essay works have aroused discussion and debates everywhere from graduate seminars to the pages of popular magazines to the Hollywood movie, not much attention was given to her novels. Actually Sontag's novels deserve a much more careful reading, not because her major literary achievement lies in here, but as a way of tracing her development as a writer whose fiction and nonfiction have an essayistic quality. As she confessed to interviewer Jonathan Cott in 1978:

"I've always thought of the essays and the fiction as dealing with very different themes...It's only quite recently, because it's been forced on my attention, that I realized the extent to which the essays and the fiction share the same themes...It's almost frightening to discover how unified they are" (qtd. in Rollyson, *RSS* viii-ix)

Among the omnifarious subjects touched upon by Susan Sontag in her discourse, the writer's piercing interpretation of contemporary American society impressed the author of this thesis most as the author reads through Sontag's primary works. Rejecting interpretation of literary works, Sontag herself insists that the understanding of art should start from intuitive response, "experiencing the luminousness of thing in itself, of things being what they are" but not from critical analysis or intellectual considerations as she asserts, "interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art" (*AI* 7-13).

Sontag applies this same artistic approach, what she called “transparency,” into her experimental writing as a way for continuing her exploration of contemporary culture. As a Jewish descendant, it seems that Sontag always locates herself in a by-stander’s position and observes the country with a kind of cool, detached neutrality, which makes her exploration and representation on subjects like American identity and characteristics most stimulating for her readers.

With the “lenses” of its narrative device, Sontag’s literary writings serve as an extended metaphor, reflecting various components of national identity of the contemporary USA that the writer has observed. Through a vivid portraying of her fictional characters and their experiences, Sontag demonstrates her own definition of American culture and values thus the process of her protagonists’ self-exile and self-rebuilding becoming a dramatic explanation of American characters. The American scholar Samuel P. Huntington in his recent work pointed out that Americans “could again find their national identity and their national purposes in their culture and religion” (Huntington 20). Exploring on this subject, Sontag’s literary creation acts exactly as an artistic experiment in redefining these “national identity” and “national purposes”.

The readers may wonder what America looks like on earth in Sontag’s vision? As a country, Sontag says in “What’s Happening to America”, an article published in *Partisan Review* that America “was created mainly by the surplus poor of Europe, reinforced by a small group who were just *Europamude* (a literary catchword in the 1840s), tired of Europe. Yet even the poorest knew both a ‘culture,’ largely invented by his social betters and administered from above, and a ‘nature’ that had been pacified for centuries...” (*Partisan Review* 52). It is just like the narrator of *In America* uncovers in Chapter Zero, most of them “...being poor unworldly villagers with occupations like peddler, innkeeper, woodcutter, Talmud student,” (*IA* 23) with a common wish of breaking away from their past, and with America as their dreaming destination.

Living on a land free of past bondages and full of opportunities, Americans proudly assured immigrants that “theirs was the greatest country on earth, the proof being that everyone knew about America and everyone wanted to come there” (*IA* 100). So does Bogdan, Maryna’s Polish aristocratic husband, reflect in his diary

"Americans have turned out to excel at freeing themselves from the past... The past is not really important here. Here the present does not reaffirm the past but supersedes and cancels it. The weakness of any attachment to the past is perhaps the most striking thing about the Americans. It makes them seem superficial, shallow, but it gives them great strength and self-confidence. They do not feel dwarfed by *anything*." (IA 223)

The post-industrial society, reflected in Sontag's discourse, presents itself as a chaotic world, full of passions, hustles and bustles yet lack of enough reason and order. In her essay "What Is Happening in America," Sontag openly voices out that "The White race is the cancer of human history! ... Its ideologies and inventions—which eradicates autonomous civilization wherever it spreads, which has upset the ecological balance of the planet, which now threatens the very existence of itself" (Sontag, *Partisan Review* 37). Indeed, through her writings Sontag intends to show us the pathology of the contemporary American society. Her short story *The Way We Are Living Now* also touches upon the theme of illness. Suffering from some incurable disease, the hero in the story has fallen rapidly into deep horrors, captured by feelings of anxiety, distress and misgivings. People around him, those who appear to be healthy, seem to be entangled by such kind of tension and horrors as well. In fact, a diseased way of living and ill mood is much more rapidly spreading around people than any formidable disease, which should be the theme Sontag really implicates. It makes people fall into decadence, void, and despair, with death being their termination. The various trends of thought and fashions permeate the twentieth century, such as nihilism and the postmodernism, to different degrees representing people's mental sickness in today's society. Of a piece with the essay "What Is Happening in America," the novel *In America* again serves as a representation of all these illness and confusions as well as an experimental search for solutions which the writer herself carried out.

Facing the alienations and confusions brought by industrialization and urbanization, many artists and intellectuals in their study have made unremitting efforts to quest for a good solution to save our culture. D. H. Lawrence endeavors to find a way out through religions and sexual instincts while Yeats stretches for inspirations from mysticism and the Irish folk myths; Ezra Pound lays his ideal of civilization renaissance on the oriental Confucianism and the Roman aristocratic philosophy while T. S. Eliot ascribes all the evils and corruptions of the modern society to the decrease of religions.

Sontag seems to hold a similar aesthetic standpoint with Theodor Adorno, believing that art has a function of salvation, capable of leading our turbid society back to the track of harmony and integrity. In her fiction, Sontag's characters also maintain the idea that artistic creation be an effective solution for their problems. In order to get out of the despondent and embarrassing conditions, they often choose to lead an exiling life into a Utopian land to achieve peace, clarity and acquire self-redemption to a certain degree. In Sontag's last novel, *In America*, the protagonist and her friends perceive the image of the USA exactly as such a perfect "Utopia", a land on which they can forget their past misfortunes and build a new identity in self-exile.

The novel shifts forward 100 years to a portrait of the U.S.A. on the brink of the modern age. The writer sets the story in the late 1890s, a time when the whole nation rapidly developed on its track of modernization, which is not a good time to everyone in this country. Just as Peter Berger points out in his masterpiece, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* that people will suffer from a feeling of insecurity and uncertainty, casting doubts upon traditional social criterions and the meaning of their lives under the influence of utilitarian materialism. They may even regard themselves as rootless and homeless. To put it simple, the process of modernization has resulted in a group of "homeless minds and frustrated individuals". Apparently, Sontag holds a deep compassion for these "homeless minds". In a thesis commenting on the French anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss, she said that faced with the inexorable evolvement of human history, the person who explores human culture seriously will by no means break away from this homeless feeling and suffers the "intellectual vertigo". In order to affirm their identities, those victims have to exculpate themselves in various ways.

In the novel *In America*, the Polish immigrants appear neither more nor less than a group of representatives of the aforementioned type of victims, homeless, suffering from the "intellectual vertigo" and looking for their own identities, especially the novel's heroine, Maryna who is an epitome and model figure of those "homeless minds and frustrated individuals" (Dong 630).

In 1876, a group of Poles traveled to Anaheim, California to establish a utopian society there, their leader being Maryna Zalezowska, Poland's greatest actress, who has forsaken everything she owned at the peak of her career, crossed the Atlantic Ocean coming to America in order to create a farming commune.

There is a heroic spirit of self-exile in this brave action—completely break away from the past and to create a new life in a distant, strange country. Maryna ostensibly practices this action out of two obvious reasons: being sick of stage life and worried about replacement of other new actresses. The real reason for Maryna to leave her homeland, however, cannot be that simple. As the “queen of the Poland stage”, she bears on her shoulders the pride and “the aspirations of a nation” (*IA* 306). Therefore, her action of self-exile actually implies the tragic destiny of the Polish nation that has suffered all kinds of tramples and oppressions in its miserable history.

Ever since the French war against Russia led by Napoleon in 1812, in which the Polish “legions shed blood for” the French army, in more than 100 years, Poland has fallen the colonies of foreign forces and been divided by Austria, Prussia and Russia for several times. Although the brave Poles have launched numerous insurrections for defending their motherland, none of these rebellions “had any chance of success.” As Maryna’s husband, Bogdan recollects in his diary:

“Our nation [has a] tragic history. We lack political wisdom that our proneness to enthusiasm is childish, incapacitating; certainly not compatible with good management, cleverness, discipline, moderation, and other qualities necessary in the coming giant struggles of all nations for survival in an era of industrialization and militarism. That we can always be counted on for gallantry and acts of personal courage, but that there is a certain conceit in our high-mindedness. The most stinging charge: that we are a nation of dilettantes.” (*IA* 223)

The failures one after another throwbacks many patriotic Polish intellectuals and causes their disillusionment and despair about the homeland’s misfortunes and bleak future. In order to escape the despotic local government, they choose to immigrate to America in succession.

According to reliable statistics, about 2,000,000 Poles immigrated to America during the period from 1880 to 1910 (Zaretskii 5). Among those sections of populace, the imagination about America unfailingly equals to the “Utopia of the common man” (qtd. in Masse 10), which helps to legitimate what their parents and grandparents’ long aspirations: prosperity and an easier everyday life, great entertainment and the recognition of freedom and equality. For “most Polish families [who] had fled to America after the failed insurrections of 1830 and 1863,” (*IA* 163) America is “not just another country.

While the unjust course of European history had ordained that a Pole could not be a citizen of Poland (but only of Russia or Austria or Prussia), the just course of world history had created America" (*IA* 345).

Therefore, America has become the homeless people's refuge, a land where people mind their own business, regardless of their neighbors' failing history. Just as Bogdan observed, "for more than fifty years Europeans have been saying, if it doesn't work, we can always go to America. Socially mismatched lovers escaping a family ban on their union, artists unable to win the audience they know their work deserves, revolutionaries crushed by the hopelessness of revolutionary endeavor—to America!" so did Maryna. When the chances to revive the nation's aspirations becomes slim day by day, leaving Poland for America turns out to be a reasonable choice for Maryna. "America is supposed to repair the European scale of injury or simply make one forget what one wanted, to substitute other desires" (*IA* 209). To great extent, it is for the purpose of unloading the nation's responsibility and repairing the psychological injuries that Poland has cast on her that Maryna takes upon herself to leave her native place, which is confirmed later by one of Maryna's letters to Henryk, Maryna's friend who had chosen to stay in Poland, in which she writes, "I have set my heart against the past. America is good for that. I find in my new country whatever I want to find there" (*IA* 323-24). She wants to free herself from the past, from the history and aspires for the future just as Americans do.

However, the distance between the past and future is much longer than the voyage on the sea that she crossed when traveling from Poland to America. Although she doesn't understand at that time how the sea between the Old World and the New World will become such an important boundary in her life, neither has she been aware how the sea she has crossed during this voyage will shape her whole life and unveil another possibility of her future.

Actually the sea here may both stands for death and rebirth of the heroine—the death of the past life and the rebirth of a new life, the sea thus becoming a significant image in the novel with abundant metaphorical meanings. If the land symbolizes reason, stability and order here, the sea is doubtlessly a subversion of all these, indicating impetuous, chaos and orderlessness. It is on the boundless sea that the characters shake off the obturation and circulation of on-land life, and constitute a way free of restrictive regulations and power controls.

Therefore, a woman on the sea far from land is very possible to experience a great reversion or even thoroughly remold herself: her physical desires, mental status or life choices all break off and recomposed (Song 45). This is an important moment in the novel as a turning point of the heroine's self-rebuilding process. Indeed, as for Maryna, the sea conceals her established career direction and way of subsistence on land and opens a variety of possibilities. However, such kind of reversion also deprives her of some fixed possessions such as her motherland, her home and the most important, her definite identity. She is destined to oscillate and struggle for it in her future days. Therefore, Sontag's *In America* has its rich symbolic significance, which tells an immigrant story about emigrating from the sea to the land. It is the heroine, Maryna's dream to get on land and take root in America, employing all methods to ascertain her identity. However, the dribs and drabs in their exile life perpetually remind them that they are a rootless and homeless generation in America!

In the community on Brook Farm that they build up from nothing, Maryna and her followers begin the process of thoroughly rebuilding themselves. From Sontag's poetic depiction, readers can taste the mysterious aroma thrown off by the wilderness there. "They have a rousing view—everything that looks away from the house is splendid...No landscape had struck any of them as this awesomely strange." Placed themselves in such an environment, "they had never felt [so] erect, [so] vertical," so relaxed and happy (*IA* 152-54). However, like all the Utopian societies in the history, their commune cannot evade its final destiny as a failed illusion. Although they dodged the evil hands of absolutism, they couldn't get away from the powerful tidal wave of economical development in a progressively modernized world. Besides, the transience of Utopia has decided its bleak prospect from the very beginning. When Thomas Moore created the term of "Utopia" in 1516, he borrowed the word "eu" (which means beauty) and "ou" (which means nihil) for Greek literature to implicate a place that is beautiful but never existent, that is, an ideal but impossible community. Therefore, the Utopia in the poets' depictions always shows itself as a perfect or ideal society that only exists in the past or future, but never, at present.

But Maryna is such a courageous person that she endeavors to make Utopian society into a real existence. For the immigrants, America represents a new life of "pure future" or "pastlessness". Maryna's travels are motivated by a search for growth and happiness, defined as "not being trapped in your individual existence, a container with your name on it" (*IA* 216).

Marcuse in his *The Aesthetic Dimension* declared that Utopia is an encouragement on people's emancipation of their instincts. That is to say, Maryna's effort to establish a Utopian commune is a replacement of her subconscious desires to emancipate her colonized motherland, Poland. Cassirer further explores the positive meaning of this replacement in his *An Essay on Man* and regards the Utopia's great function as carving out a possible place to fight against the negative tolerance of the present reality. Paul Ricoeur also said that as an artifice of irony, what Utopia provides can become a real critical approach, or a refuge to resist the present reality. All in all, Utopia has both its negative and positive functions. Besides the description of "escapement" and "satisfaction," utopia also serves as a "suspension" and "criticism" on the existent order. Indeed, Maryna finds herself unable to change her country's situation, so she chooses to leave it, which is an obvious negation on the practice to overthrow Poland's cruel absolutism imposed by foreign forces. But from the positive perspective, we can still regard the utopian commune as a forceful challenge and mocking on the darkness and unfairness of the existing society. It mirrors the immigrants' doubts and rebelling wills as well as the perplexion and anxiety felt by people who live in the modern society. The land in the novel actually is a faithful representation of the contemporary world in which we everyone lives.

Sontag combines art with the liberation and sublimation of humanity, considering literature "a calling, even a kind of salvation." as she told Leslie Garis, "art and thought continue to feed people and give them an idea of something better. A better state of one's feelings or simply the idea of a silence in one's self that allows one to think or to feel" (Garis, *NYT*). Once in an interview, Sontag stated more clearly that novels "are an education of feeling. They extend your feeling. They should make you more compassionate, more... have more empathy with other human beings" (Farnsworth, *Online Newshour*). Through Maryna's mouth she says, the theater seemed to her "nothing less than the truth. A higher truth. Acting in a play, one of the great plays, you became better than you really were" (*IA* 32).

The well-known American actor Edwin Booth also claims: "Shakespeare could almost make me virtuous. How low I would be without him. I can always promote myself to some better plane with his words" (*IA* 382). Maryna obviously embraces the same aesthetic idea with Lionel Trilling, by asserting that "art was not just art but served a higher moral or wholesomely civic purpose," (*IA* 306) which usually comes from aesthetic experiences.

In consequence, Sontag advocates, "in place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art... We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more" (*AI* 14). She wrote that art must be "responded to with the sensory, not the intellectual, faculties, with greater emphasis given to the form rather than the content of a work" (*CLC Vol.10* 484). She insists that as an artwork, regardless of the author's subjective intentions, it should not advocate a particular viewpoint. The greatest artists are able to reach some kind of "sublime neutrality". She cautions her readers against the accustomed way of thinking and perceiving, telling them to avoid any one-sided, simplistic understanding or interpretation of artistic works. Readers should carefully appreciate the complicacy, multiplicity and paradoxes of art, wiping off its affectations so as to explore its mysteries. Sontag not only experiences art following this principle, but also applies it to literary creation. Therefore, her novel *In America* also becomes a work full of complexity, richness and paradoxes, requiring readers to see, to hear and to feel!

Above all, America presents as a significant metaphor with its rich symbolic meanings. America is a land of myths, with endless stories, where you can rewrite the past to your heart's desire; you can rename yourself, beautify or smear some of your own features. And each story can be narrated in different ways, different languages and different perspectives, focusing on different sides. As time passes, you can hardly "remember which of the stories you relate about your life are true. And all stories respond to some inner truth" (*IA* 269). We can arrive a safe conclusion that Sontag's description of the art and human nature has a striking similarity with the post-modernist critic Ihab Hassan, who insightfully declares that history is like something written on a piece of parchment, capable of revising or rewriting through the interpreters' different perspectives. From another perspective, American society can also be viewed as a metaphor that can be elaborated from different angles. It seems that America will never be satisfied, always expecting new opportunities, new possibilities and new hopes, which is like the heroine playing solitaire:

"You don't cheat when you play solitaire. But neither do you accept every hand you deal yourself; you redeal and redeal until you see a hand (say, with two kings and at least one ace) that gives you a better chance to win... She dealt herself the cards. She lost. If you lose, you *have* to play again. You think, just one more game. But even if you win, you still want to play again." (*IA* 356)

On the one hand, America is full of violence, poverty and moral corruptions; but on the other hand, it is vibrant, full of vigor and hope, with infinite potentialities.

The “weakness of any attachment to the past” makes Americans seem superficial, shallow, but it also gives them “great strength and self-confidence” (*IA* 223). The Americans uphold inventions, bearing themselves with wisdom, prudence and moderation. But there are many ignorant and cranky idealists as well, who are enthusiastic in some strange, bizarre religious sects and out of touch with the reality.

As for fictional creation, Sontag argues that the old forms of art have become clichés, the old topics have been completely exhausted, and the old styles have as well gone out of date due to abusing. the old themes have been completely exhausted. In her writings, Sontag has purposely cleared up the dichotomy of truth, goodness, beauty and lie, evil, ugliness in traditional art works, as well as the unity and oneness of the contents. Therefore, her novel is imbued with contradictions, conflicts and paradoxes. Art in Europe is a national symbol, a sound therapy to purify the human soul. But in America, artists are abased to be a group of entertainers. “The public expects to be entertained, not elevated, and is most entertained by the grandiose and the bizarre” (*IA* 139). In order to please the audience, they “were expected to exhibit the confusions of inner vehemence, and have eccentric foibles and extravagant needs” (*IA* 347). They must let the audience “cheer and laugh and poke each other in the ribs and cry” (*IA* 242). However, in this country there are also well-known acting families like the Booths, who devoted themselves to art, and opened the “Temple of Theatrical Art” in which “artistic values would take precedence over the business point of view” (*IA* 380). Tens of thousands of spectators just appreciate stimulations from sensational comedies or “loud music, towering decor” (*IA* 149) while “Boston was full of discriminating Shakespearians.” They knew Shakespeare’s plays so well that the actors who “mispronounced a word or even misplaced an emphasis” will be “hissed or noisily corrected by the pit and gallery” (*IA* 309).

Stage performance is a symbol with its rich significance as well. Life is a stage; the society is a stage; “God is an actor, too” (*IA* 59). Performance is transfiguration and manipulation. The actors must transform costumes and props to play different roles. They have to “show what is emphatic in a person, what is sustained” (*IA* 305).. Then, should an actor show his own essence? Maryna is caught in a specious dilemma. Sontag in her unique postmodernist perspective gives up the focus of secular life, the certainty of meaning, the eternity of truth and the ultimacy of value itself.

In her consideration, the actor influences the audience, he himself is undergoing a certain kind of transfiguration at the same time, and experiencing the same emotional changes as the role he is acting:

“Acting in a play, one of the great plays, you became better than you really were... You could feel yourself being improved by what was given to you, on the stage, to express...[You] felt no more than [yourself]. The old self-transfiguring thrill was gone...I’ve always needed to identify myself with each of the tragic heroines I play. I suffer with them, I weep real tears, which I often can’t stop after the curtain goes down, and have to lie motionless in my dressing room until my strength returns. Throughout my whole career I’ve never succeeded in giving a performance without feeling my character’s agonies.” (IA 51)

However, Maryna still gets herself confused about the actor’s own essence. What is an actor’s essence? “What would I show if I was playing myself?” She further reckons, maybe “an actor doesn’t need to have an essence. Perhaps it would be a hindrance for an actor to have an essence. An actor needs only a mask” (IA 306). Just as what Edwin Booth candidly declares to Maryna, an actor “seems to be one thing, and underneath that seeming, what is there? Nothing. Nothing. Nothing” (IA 373).

It seems that Sontag has presented her readers with this metaphysical problem about the nature of performance. The novel’s pace, like Maryna’s self-reflection, is sidetracked by elaborate intellectualizing about the theater conveyed by journals, letters back to Poland, and long discussions. As in her essays, Sontag has a terrific feel for the way theatrical styles evolve, seeming vital and true when they burst on the scene, and embarrassing and bizarre the minute audiences decide they are dated. Maryna appears to stand on a threshold. Beside Shakespeare, she specializes in the corny but undeniably moving plays that dominated the 19th-century stage: weepies in the tradition of “Camille,” starring a heroine whose love violates social mores, leading inexorably to her gorgeous, swooning death. The poignant implication is that in a few decades Maryna may be regarded as a high priestess of dreck.

But for her time she is an artist of the highest caliber; night after night, crowd and critics alike get out their handkerchiefs for her performances.

In fact, it is the same dilemma suffered by every individual on the stage of society. Is Maryna capable of rebuilding herself through her self-exile and transfiguration? Or has she only put on another mask to play another role?

Maryna's stage career and the ups and downs of life has not only left us with more foods for thought, but also help the heroine to understand that life can have different possibilities and to find a way to get out of her self-consciousness, guilty feelings, moral speciosity and its jeering guises (Elliott 1186). In *Maryna*, Sontag invested "everything she knows" about being an artist, activist and performer. And Ryszard, Maryna's would-be lover, is the character who comes most alive. A journalist like Sontag, he conveys many of her views about life, journalism, and, most poignantly, death. The author and her biography are poignantly close to the reader in Ryszard: "Even if my life ended now, he said to himself, I would still think, My God, what a journey I have made" (JA 219).

Attempting to rescue the novel from its growing reputation as a conventional work, the critic called *In America* an example of postmodernism built out of a "succession of microstructures" that link the "monuments of the past, the works of Stendhal, Tolstoy, George Eliot" to Maryna's nineteenth-century journey of discovery.

Sontag's novels reenact a panoramic exhibition of the America society and especially, what the Americans have suffered both in the past and present, through her fictional narrating historical experiences in a much earlier age. By providing her characters with a foreigner's perspective, Sontag practices in her historical novels "a brilliant and profound investigation into the fate of thought and culture in America," (Rollyson 178) and offers the readers a redefinition of American characteristics. In her presentation of fictional characters' exiling experiences and their surrounding contexts, Sontag actually shows us what America and the Americans should be like according to her understandings of the nation and the people.

With material vitality, boundless freedom and incomparable potentialities, the American society in Sontag's writings appears to be a land of Utopian, an ideal place for adventurers to forget the past and rebuild a new self. Sontag's fictional creation can also be viewed as a willed enterprise, an ambitious American dream. She dreams of herself as a writer just as she dreams of what an America will be. If American culture can claim any particular value or identity, certainly it should be a highly evolved awareness of many of the clichés Sontag is describing as if for the first time. Her narrations perfectly capture her own willed existence by advocating the "elevation of the will and its capacity to transform the world" (Rollyson 127).

While acknowledging her utopian tendencies and her doubts about her prevalence in America, she is reminiscent of the earlier American dreams and insists that the country deserves to be idealized.

After reading Sontag's *In America*, Richard Lourie, in the *Washington Post Book World*, praised the novel's panoramic quality and its "full arsenal of narrative devices—standard third person, omniscience, diaries, letters, snatches of dialogue, monologues both interior and spoken aloud." Mark Luce in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, admired the scope and style of the novel: "With charm, aplomb, variances of voice and her trademark wit, Sontag explores identity, nationalism, idealism and one woman's quest for transformation" (Rollyson 178). However, the significance of Sontag lies in that she does not only delineate a landscape of America with an analysis of its problems but also takes pains to carve out a way out for those trapped Americans. Sontag accelerates her heroines to a self-exiling process of self-rebuilding and self-redemption.

Having molded her self into her entire project, Sontag has also reproduced herself in her work with her essays and fiction pouring into one another until they appeared to her as hybridized things. As *Conversations with Susan Sontag* demonstrates, she has always read herself as a writer in process, disburdening herself of ideas that no longer seem useful or true. Capable of switching sides in an argument without any embarrassment, she acts rather like a performer enjoying a new role. Considering herself as "self-invented", she has said at several points in her career that she is starting over and has always portrayed herself "in flight from [her] past work" (Ruas, *Conversations With American Writers* 185). In 1982 when *A Susan Sontag Reader*, a collection of selected writings from *The Benefactor* through to her 1981 essay on Roland Barthes was published, Sontag in an interview describes it as marking the end of a distinct period in her writings: "Now I feel I am at the beginning of another period ... I'm really a slow developer and my best is yet to come" (Ruas 187).

Then following the publication of *The Volcano Lover* Sontag told several interviewers again it represented a turning point in her career and the fulfillment of a long-held desire to launch herself fully as a novelist. "This book is the best book I've ever written," so as she says, "I don't want readers to take my books off their shelves but I feel like I'm beginning again..." (Shone 45). Contracted to publish four novels, though, she is unlikely to confine herself to fiction.

It's the working illusion of being self-created that generates such a "flight" as she constantly revises her positions and makes a dramaturgy of her ideas and passions. What she says of Roland Barthes's "multiple identifications" is true of her own:

Barthes's work—he avows that he writes by obsessions—consists of continuities and detours; the accumulation of points of view; finally, their disburdenment: a mixture of progress and caprice ... The writer's freedom that Barthes describes is, in part, **flight**. The writer is the deputy of his own ego—of that self in perpetual flight before what is fixed by writing, as the mind is in perpetual **flight** from doctrine. (SSR 443)

Seeking out opposing positions so as to test her critical assumptions, Susan Sontag makes her self-canceling writings such a complex intellectual autobiography. Ambivalence and uncertainty seem to be the sovereign modality of her work, which has left a deep impression on the author of this thesis, and in the essays she obviously writes an antithetical criticism, formally and psychologically tempering her enthusiasms for "radical" modernism or agonistically testing herself against her heroes. She often seems to be quarrelling with herself, which is certainly a force of her work as she has made of this self-cultivation a mode of general cultural inquiry. Like many of her forerunners she embraces modernism as a form of utopian compensation, a way of making herself at home in a cosmopolitan intellectual culture, while identifying with the "feeling of homelessness" that she believes distinguished herself from the restlessness and alienation of the modern intellectual.

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