

**S**ONTAG was a tall, handsome, fluent and articulate woman. She settled in New York, where she lived, off and on, after separating from her husband, the social thinker Philip Rieff, in 1959, and her career went stellar there. Sontag belonged to the small number of women writers and intellectuals, led by Mary McCarthy, Hannah Arendt and Elizabeth Hardwick, who gave New York life its brilliance, without becoming a "New York Intellectual". She regarded all provincialisms, of Paris, Oxford or New York, as uninteresting. Even America failed to engage her. "I don't like America enough to want to live anywhere else except Manhattan. And what I like about Manhattan is that it's full of foreigners. The America I live in is the America of the cities. The rest is just drive-through."

Her first collection of essays, *Against Interpretation*, published in 1966, was followed in 1969 by *Styles of Radical Will*. Under *The Sign of Saturn* appeared in 1980, and the long awaited *Where the Stress Falls* in 2001. Her passions were for cinema (preferably European), photography, European writers and philosophers, and for aesthetic pronouncements of a particular pugnacity.

Despite a brimming and tartly phrased political sensibility, she was fundamentally an aesthete. She offered a reorientation of American cultural horizons. On *Style*, the title essay in her first collection, plus *Notes on Camp*, set out an economy of culture that was moral without being moralistic, and began a radical displacement of heterosexuality.

It was a gay sensibility that she interpreted, and that shaped her response to the visual arts. It was also the central focus of her emotional life. But she remained essentially private, and when she wrote about herself, there was always an element of self-distancing. In a culture expecting easy intimacies from its great figures, she was aloof, poised, posed: she was camera-friendly. But you never could claim to know Sontag, however much New York was alive with gossip about her loves, her ex-loves, her next book.

She moved readily from references to philosophers, poets, literary theoreticians and film auteurs. Reviewers were, rightly, dazzled. Though she changed her mind repeatedly, it was always done with style and conviction. If you wanted to argue with Sontag, you had to enter her work in terms of the way a stance, a position, made sense as an intervention.

Sontag dismissed Leni Reifenstahl in 1975, after the photographer had put in decades of work on her rehabilitation -- all of which were ruined by the cool brilliance of Sontag's analysis of the allure of fascism. "The colour is black," she wrote in *Fascinating Fascism*, "the material is leather, the seduction is beauty, the justification is honesty, the aim is ecstasy, the fantasy is death."

Her astringent attack against interpretation ("the project of interpretation is largely reactionary") carried an aesthete's preference for readers, or consumers, to leave works of art alone, not to seek to replace them with something else. This was not a view that found favour among Deconstructionists, but Sontag was indifferent to the corporate earnestness of Yale or Harvard.

Born Susan Rosenblatt in New York in 1933, she was the daughter of a fur trader. When he died in 1938, her mother Mildred, and sister Judith (who suffered from asthma) left New York in search of warmer weather. Settling in

# A Fighter Armed With a Pen

*To some, she was "a political pilgrim", to others a "liberal lioness", but there was never debate about Susan Sontag's first love: the written word.*

ERIC HOMBERGER

