

Under the Sign of Saturn

S.Sontag

July 9–10, 2013

This is essentially a collection of essays on different people written in the 70's. She very much comes across as an intellectual 'groupie', a designation, she no doubt would have resented.

The titled essay is on Benjamin, certainly a cult figure among intellectuals. Saturn refers to the slowest planet (in classical astrology) and is a reference to the melancholic temperament of Benjamin. He was slow and methodical, exalting the life of the *flaneur* in the urban landscape knowing the art of getting lost, which was easy to him, because of his undeveloped sense of direction. He liked miniaturizing, because it made for complete portable worlds. He made lists of everything, it seemed that he numbered the books he read. When he in the late 30's was reading Marx's *Eighteen Brumaire* a friend discovered that it was numbered 1649. Of course there is no indication of when he started the practice, but at the rate of a book a week, we are talking about thirty years of reading, which would have indicated that he started the list in his late teens. Benjamin is hard to read. This might either mean that he is very profound or just that he is confused. My own attempts have definitely met with failure. Others seem obviously to be enthralled by his texts and the ideas they purport to purvey. Sontag admits that it is torture to read him, but of course from her point of view, this makes it an irresistible challenge, She claims that all the sentences are brimming with ideas, as if they all want to say everything by themselves. And Benjamin confessed that his style of writing was that after each completed sentence he needed to start afresh. This does not make for easy and pleasurable reading. Constant repetition is exhausting as well as frustrating. Sontag describes his style as 'freeze-frame' baroque. Benjamin is a name that is dropped constantly in her writing, in particular in the other of her essays.

Who is Paul Goodman? At the time, meaning the 60's, he must have been quite known in liberal circles, he died maybe too early to make his presence more permanent. Sontag refers to his unique voice, so essential to a writer, and one of the very few if perhaps even the unique American contemporary writer she felt she needed to read all what he wrote. What he really wrote and thought is not clear, at least the essay fails to convey a lasting impression.

Approaching Artaud is by far the longest piece, and it simply goes on and on. Artaud if any was a tortured soul, and in as far the work of a writer is authenticated by his suffering, Artaud is right there. He was considered mad, and was at the end of his life confined. Sontag denies though that there is a clinical basis for insanity, it is all a matter of politics. As mad, society considers those who say things which it finds unintelligible for some reason or totally unacceptable. The reaction is not to respond to it, but to ignore it, to treat the person as if of no importance and his or her utterances as of no consequence. The excuse of madness makes it easier for readers to put up with a disturbing work, because it assures them that it does not need to be taken seriously in the end. Just as a

disturbing piece of news loses its edge, once we realize it is not true. What did Artaud try to do? Reinvent and revitalize the theater. He was active as an actor, but never, perhaps for obvious reasons, getting the opportunity to produce and direct himself. One play of his was put on stage and was an abysmal failure. Still he is now part of the canon, this happens to some extreme artists. Not because they are being understood, only because they become fascinating as phenomena.

Roland Barthes gets a few pages. He dies at the comparatively early age of 64, and as his debut was late, in his late thirties, this means that his literary and public intellectual life was even shorter. He was constantly active and productive. Whatever he read he wrote on. The happy, satisfied intellectual who was both charmed and disconcerted by the fame he acquired.

The piece on Canetti is instructive. He wanted to live for a long time, because his mind was so active and had so much to give. A hundred years would not be enough, three hundred would be more to his liking. Canetti grew up in a multi-lingual environment and commanded many languages, although he preferred to write in German, a language which was actually taught to him relatively late in his life, if I remember correctly from his autobiography. Writing in German, but actually most of his life residing in Britain. Canetti started out getting a Ph.D. in Chemistry in Vienna, before launching a literary career which started with his one and only novel -*Auto da Fe*, which centers of the tribulations of a book-worm, isolated within the confines of his library and hence the prey of unscrupulous outsiders, such as his housekeeper whom he unwisely marries. The whole thing ends up going in up in smoke. Surely Canetti was attached to his library, but Canetti's real passion was his 'Masse und Macht' his sociological study of the crowd, and how it goes beyond that of its constituents which occupied his attention for more than a decade. Canetti had no interest in culture and art, according to Sontag. No *l'art pour l'art* for him, hence his lack of irony, she concludes.

Her reflections on fascism are perhaps the most interesting of her essays. She is taken by Syberberg's movie about Hitler. This gargantuan, low budget product extravaganza, which owed so much to Wagner. In this long movie he tries to analyze the phenomenon of Hitler and the complicity of the German people in his rise. Repeatedly she refers to the Symbolist movement to place his particular idiom within a tradition. The movie was not meant for commercial showings, and in fact the director was very careful to whom and when it was allowed to be screened. The purpose of both its making and its viewing being seen as therapeutic in nature. The author effuses over the work and clearly sees it as a very successful attempt at artistically representing evil and its consequences.

Leni Riefenstahl was the director of some stunning Nazi propaganda movies, and as such she naturally is a rather controversial figure. Sontag resents the kind of rehabilitation she has benefited from and shows that it is based on lies. The occasion for the essay is the publication of the large coffee-table book on the Nuba people in southern Sudan. Does this not show that Riefenstahl was not really a Nazi, she was not racist, she was only interested in beauty. Not so fast, Sontag warns. If you look closer at the book, you see it as an exaltation of exactly those fascist values for which she had formerly been censured. That the heroes now are Black Natives does not change anything at all, except for the most literal-minded. All the major ingredients are here. The cult of death and beauty, the body

over the intellect (they are all wrestlers), the strong defeating the weak, yet the individual subservient to the collective. And of course it is a vanishing tribe, as of yet unsullied by civilization, a sentimental attitude that provides the emotional nourishment of Fascism. 'The Triumph of the Will' is of course a beautiful movie and done with consummating skill, But is it a documentary? In fact the Nuremberg rally in question was staged to be filmed. The event it documents is itself documenting the event. This has led some people to think of Nazism as essentially aesthetic in character and its great flaw, mixing politics with the beautiful. Of course, Sontag, reminds the reader, similar propaganda movies were also put up by the left at the time. But no other filmmaker were able to rely on the same abundant resources as was Riefenstahl.

Riefenstahl is not deemed worthy of filling the essay by herself, there is also an add-on. The fact that Nazi uniforms, especially the SS-variety, has become considered sexy, especially in homosexual S&M circles. Of course, regrettably ironic as it may be, it makes perfect sense, argues Sontag. The strong vanquishing the weak is of course what s&m is all about. Pure sexuality in a sense, divorced from personhood and tenderness, de-individualized and distilled. After a certain period has passed after the war, the fascinating interest for the Nazis becomes more or less pornographic.

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