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Notes on Sontag. By Phillip Lopate. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2009. 252 pages.

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In a memorable line from the third page of the introduction to *Notes on Sontag*, Phillip Lopate strikes a balanced note: "Those who are looking for a hatchet-job here will be as disappointed as those seeking hagiography." This is an admirable claim but would seem to contradict another well-struck phrase on the previous page in which he implies the use of sharp implements: "The idea of one writer meditating on another holds enormous appeal for me, because we feed so much on each other's marrow" (2). Indeed, despite the fact that a large portion of the book is a fairly even-handed examination of Sontag's essays, perhaps the best "marrow" does come to light when Lopate begins hacking or, less often, fawning. Equally interesting is that Lopate (perhaps unwittingly) delivers on the reciprocal aspects of his "marrow" comment, in that his critique ends up cutting—and praising—Lopate as much as Sontag herself.

"Her fiction is, in the main, poor" (9). Throughout *Notes*, Lopate attacks not only the majority of Sontag's novels and films, but, more importantly, Sontag's insistence that ". . . she be honored for her novels, like the clown wanting to play Hamlet" (9). At various points in the book, he returns to this need of hers to be validated for her fiction writing; often he cannot understand her position—"I, who revere the art of essay writing, and who can never regard literary nonfiction as even a fraction inferior to fiction, find puzzling Sontag's need to be thought primarily a novelist" (10). However, Lopate is also able to humanize this need in light of how, for many postwar novelists, "Novels were considered the Big Game, essays the minor pursuit" (10). And even though he is happy to be thought of as an essayist who also writes novels, he identifies with what he perceives as Sontag's ". . . need to maneuver any situation so as to put [herself] in a superior light" (19).

The structure of *Notes* is a chronological look at each of her major works interspersed with personal reflections and recollections of a dozen or so encounters between the two authors. But this apparently methodic approach is belied on a number of levels and in ways that end up invigorating what would otherwise be an overly academic survey. Per his statements about her fiction in the Introduction, Lopate cannot bring himself to devote equal time to Sontag's fiction (along with film) as to her essays (and personal encounters)—he devotes only about 40 pages to the former, compared with more or less 200 pages to the latter.

One of the best ways in which Lopate delves into Sontag as an essayist and personality is to return throughout the book to her famous closing sentence in *Against Interpretation*: "'In place of hermeneutics we need an erotics of art'. . . " (32). In the introduction, Lopate obliquely references this sentence (and simultaneously stretches it further) by remarking, "She was an enthusiast—a lover, not a skeptic—who needed to fall hard for a position and convince herself it was the only one" (15). He refers to this again in an alternate but equally astute take: "From the start she was looking for a radical politics that would merge justice with sexiness and sensuality, for a revolution that would 'swing'" (50). This is a vein that he continues to expand in multiple directions every so often—one last, balanced example:

> It's always anomalous when a writer of Sontag's intelligence goes crude or smutty. Maybe it springs from impatience, the wish for Rabelaisian bawdiness to cut through the burdens of consciousness. In any case, Sontag seems to have viewed the United States as relentlessly vulgar, and it brought out the vulgar and unsubtle in her. (150-151)

What is important to note about *Notes* is how Lopate brings up and keeps coming back to quite a few themes arising from her essays, consistently shifting and expanding perspectives to offer a full picture of Sontag in all her complexity.

And yet, while Lopate's exploration and Sontag's essays reveal many such unique insights, it really is in the 40 pages devoted to Sontag's fiction

(and film) that the marrow of both writers is often exposed; Lopate, who we find out towards the end of the book has taught in the writing program at the University of Houston, levels critiques that smack of MFA platitudes at Sontag's novel, *The Benefactor*: ". . . nothing for the hero is finally at risk . . . [T]he plot is dramatically dead on arrival, since the novelist has failed (or refused) to equip her character with any desire" (139). This is true, but it is equally true for hundreds of novels, from much of Beckett to Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*. But much more than any counter argument, what delights about this writing-program language is the way it mirrors one of Lopate's recurrent themes: Early on in the book he describes how, as a student at Columbia, he gave Sontag a short story as an informal application to her writing group—and got rejected because of the story's realistic style.

Towards the end of the book, Lopate describes Sontag's second visit to Houston to give a reading that he has organized. They go out to dinner and Lopate seizes the opportunity to remind her of:

> . . . the group of literary undergraduates to which I had belonged (some of whom she had invited to take part in her downtown [fiction] writing group), and she acknowledged, 'Yes, you were the only one who made it,' more or less as I hoped she would. Not that it changed anything between us. (194)

The next day, the reading goes badly, and Lopate blames it on too much red wine at dinner and Sontag's inability to think of middle-class Americans as cultured enough to understand her writing. But the reader of *Notes* cannot help but wonder if Sontag's surliness might have something to do with Lopate picking his writing-group bone with her so many years later.

This is not the only time that Lopate slips out of the equation and leaves Sontag to wrestle with some larger menace that she has apparently concocted out of her own misconceptions. In another of their personal encounters, this time involving film rather than fiction, he is at an early screening of Sontag's documentary, *Promised Lands* (1974), at which he finds himself "engaged and engrossed." But he has to leave before the film

is over in order not to be twenty minutes late for a date with his girlfriend. So he walks out, but he runs into Sontag just outside the theater's doors:

> [She] called out, "You have to see the last ten minutes! It's the most powerful scene in the film." "I'm sure it is, Susan, but I'm going to have to see it some other time, because I'll be late for an appointment—" "You have to go back, it makes no sense without the end," she called after me, to no avail. How had I risen in importance so suddenly that my opinion mattered one way or the other? It was not I personally, . . . but my back—that is, I mattered by virtue of my symbolic capacity as the world's representative to walk out on her, rejecting her creative effort. (187)

On the one hand, it is hard to take issue with Lopate's reading of their exchange, particularly as he was physically there; but on the other, what if it *was* him personally that she tried to convince to return? What if, instead of his being "the world's representative," she is asking him personally to set aside his pragmatic need to make his appointment on time in order not to miss the most powerful scene in the film—a film that has clearly captured his imagination?

In discussing her posthumous collection of essays, *At the Same Time*, Lopate says her ". . . religion, in the end, came to be Literature" (11). In addition to insightful discussion of her essays, *Notes on Sontag* demonstrates some of the pitfalls that such a belief holds: insecurity, the ability to "really charm . . . or the opposite" (195), and even a certain distance from the day-to-day world. The marrow exposed here is a life that often uses pragmatic forms—essays—but remains essentially dedicated to the imagination, and the litany of Sontag's quirks that Lopate takes issue with appears to be the drawbacks of this approach. But, wittingly or not, he also points out a number of problems with the opposite slant—namely, that he has a habit of pragmatizing their encounters and in so doing, taking himself out of the equation: Her poor reading in Houston has to do with how much she drank and not his own pettiness the night before, and later she is left calling out to a universal audience member to come back, rather

than a colleague she has seen truly enjoying her art but who then allows his concerns of being late for a date to trump his own aesthetics.

Towards the close of the book, Lopate discusses how he would have liked to be real friends with Sontag, but then says, "On my end, I would also have to surrender some of my own judgmental wariness about her and trust her more" (198). Yet, as the scene outside the movie theater demonstrates, it might have been better, in a way, had he trusted his own instincts more. The best parts of this study come when he allows himself to be less judgmental and instead take his own advice: "Whether you agree with her opinions scarcely matters; sometimes they are even more stimulating when you disagree, because she means to provoke" (8).