

# THE VOLCANO LOVER: A REWRITING OF SUSAN SONTAG'S AESTHETIC THEORY

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*Abstract:* The aim of this paper is to discuss how in her novel *The Volcano Lover* (1992), the American writer and essayist Susan Sontag, deconstructs her own theoretical standing as presented in her already classical book of essays *Against Interpretation* (1966) in which she puts forward her adherence to European High Modernism.

*Keywords:* Criticism; aesthetics; novel.

■ Susan Sontag established her role as an essayist in the 1960s with the publication of her first book of essays, *Against Interpretation*, her manifesto against the American interpretive community and her public allegiance to European High Modernism both in her approach to literature and criticism.

What is particular about these essays is precisely Sontag's interpretation of the Modernist sensibility as well as the great contemporary relevance she assigns to it. As she points out in the last article of the book, she sees the 60s as the period when "there is a transformation in the function of art" (SONTAG, 1990, p. 296). This transformation, which implies a negation of the aesthetics of the past, i.e. Realism, "art as a technique for depicting and commenting on secular reality" (SONTAG, 1990, p. 296), actually mystifies art and, by extension, the artist, as it becomes the means through which the world can be turned into an aesthetic experience.

Along these lines, she criticizes writers and critics in America on the grounds that "they use literary works mainly as texts, or even pretexts, for social and cultural diagnosis – rather than concentrating on the properties of, say, a given

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novel or play, as an art work” (SONTAG, 1990, p. 298). From this perspective, in the title article of the book, she starts by questioning the value of interpretation as such. She claims that if art were understood as “experience” or “ritual” rather than in terms of “its message” (SONTAG, 1990, p. 5) – social, cultural, political – it would not need explication of any sort because when it is understood in these terms, its sole function is that of stimulating and educating the senses. In these articles, Sontag also makes the claim that the American interpretive community still regards literature above all other artistic expressions. This leads her to stress that this new sensibility embraces all the arts and does not give pre-eminence to literature.

The name of the article “Against Interpretation” calls for some reflection. It might be misleading since rather than opposing this activity as such, Sontag is actually against a certain type of interpretation according to which content is made to prevail upon form and, thus, rather than pure aesthetic expression (if that were possible) art becomes a statement upon the world, “a vehicle of ideas” (SONTAG, 1990, p. 300).

On these grounds, she upholds the view that interpretation based on content “[indicates] a dissatisfaction (conscious or unconscious) with the work, a wish to replace it by something else” (SONTAG, 1990, p. 10). Hence she proposes to replace this theory with what I see as a symmetrically equivalent one in which the focus on form excludes any consideration of content: “The best criticism, and it is uncommon, is of the sort that dissolves considerations of content into those of form” (SONTAG, 1990, p. 12).

Simultaneously, to avoid interpretation of content, she endorses a formalist type of art: “avant-gardism or abstract or decorative art” on the grounds that it “escapes” the type of interpretation that looks for “a sub-text” and, by extension, lends itself to be approached mainly in a sensorial way” (SONTAG, 1990, p. 12). Sontag’s ideal text, then, is the one that resists interpretation through its devious style because it cannot be taken as a social, political or cultural declaration about the world. It is in this spirit that she concludes the article saying that “In place of a hermeneutics, we need an erotics of art” (SONTAG, 1990, p. 14), according to which art should be regarded as a purely sensorial experiment.

Though I understand Sontag’s point as well as the context she was writing from, I believe that any discourse, and therefore the artistic too, can be subjected to various types of interpretation. What is more those works that apparently contain no ideas are, in fact, as ideological as the most purposely propagandistic since their ideological value resides in their desire to deny it. As Linda Hutcheon (1988, p. 180) says: “[...] the awareness of ideology is as much an ideological stand as common-sense lack of awareness of it”.

In the last years, though, Sontag’s allegiance to the main tenets of Formalism has mellowed down. As I see it, this fact can be perceived in the tenor of her views, as expressed in some interviews she has granted, but most markedly, and from her role of fiction writer, in her novel *The Volcano Lover* (1992). For one thing, her almost stifling discourse on aestheticism does not prevail in this text as in it she gives free rein to the polyphonic quality inherent to the discourse of the novel. It is, precisely, her new outlook on the novelistic genre that, at another level, provokes a tension between her theoretical and fictional writings that I have found of interest in *The Volcano Lover* and I intend to discuss in the present paper.

The novel deals with the life of Sir William Hamilton, the 18<sup>th</sup> Century British envoy to the Bourbon court at Naples who was a collector and connoisseur, interested in aesthetic matters, the epitome of the Enlightened man who, like Sontag herself, doted on knowledge and aesthetic sensuality.

Hamilton is better known for the affair that his second wife Emma had with Admiral Nelson. However, unlike some of the most famous narratives on the topic that limit themselves to the love story which scandalized society, Sontag has significantly rewritten the story from Hamilton's perspective, dwelling upon the aftermath of the French Revolution, particularly the spread of the Jacobin ideals to the Kingdom of Naples and the Two Sicilies. Against this historical context, and very much against her own recipe for fiction in *Against Interpretation*, the novel becomes the discursive space in which she discusses social and cultural concerns while reconsidering her own aesthetic views through her criticism of Lord Hamilton, the aesthete.

It should be pointed out, though, that despite her renewed interest in historical matters, Sontag does not keep to the Realistic historical genre in which facts are presented as absolute and objective. Rather, from a Postmodern stand which considers the constructed and, therefore, subjective quality of truth, I contend that her rendering of the Hamilton tale is in accordance with what Linda Hutcheon (1988, p. 183) calls "historiographic metafiction" which foregrounds both the story being told as well as the narrative techniques employed.

In line with historiographic metafiction, Sontag (1990, p. 259) rescues a marginal, peripheral figure of cultural history and places him under the spotlight. She deconstructs the way in which he has been textualized "as a famous cuckold" and significantly reconstructs him as a man from a centric culture in a peripheral one, patron of the arts and above all, an aesthete and collector.

One of the ideological constructions, then, that emerges in the novel is the relationship between the centrics and the ex-centric in 18th century Europe. Proving Hutcheon's words that the past is explained for what is more powerful in the present, Sir William Hamilton, who in her attempt at mixing the fictional with the historical Sontag calls "Il Cavaliere", is textualized from the perspective of his British, centric acquaintances after his return from Naples:

*When he had arrived, he was thought to look much older. He was still as lean [...] But he had lost his caste's pallor. The darkening of his white skin since he'd left seven years ago was remarked with something approaching disapproval. Only the poor – that is most people – were sunburned. Not the grandson of a duke, the youngest son of a lord, the childhood companion of the king itself [...]. Nine months in England had restored his bony face to a pleasing wheyness [...]* (SONTAG, 1992, p. 11).

A rupture is perceived in the text as the Protean third person narrative subject –which permanently reminds the reader of its presence as well as of the constructed quality of the text – implicitly ironizes the way in which the culturally biased English regard both the European Other and the poor. The Cavaliere, on the other hand, is keen on making it clear that he still belongs among his acquaintances. This idea is put forward through the intertextuality with his many letters: "This place has not changed me, I have the same homebred superiorities, I have not gone native" (SONTAG, 1992, p. 67).

The theme of the ex-centrics is duly pursued throughout the narrative as the majority of the novel takes place in Naples. From a 20<sup>th</sup> Century perspective, the narrative subject admiringly states about the city: “It was bigger than Rome, it was the wealthiest as well as the most populous city on the Italian peninsula and, after Paris, the second largest city on the European continent [...]” (SONTAG, 1992, p. 20). However, for the Cavaliere, “a true son of the North” (SONTAG, 1992, p. 51), it embodied the spirit of the lazy south: “I must be patient, he said to himself. I am among savages” (SONTAG, 1992 p. 51).

For Hamilton, a Cartesian man, from one of the hegemonic cultures in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Naples and the Neapolitans are reduced to mere performance, a show to keep himself entertained. Hence the social ills appear to him to be another instance of the picturesque quality of the country:

*Living abroad facilitates treating life as a spectacle – it is one of the reasons that people of means move abroad. Where those stunned by the horror of the famine and the brutality and incompetence of the government’s response saw unending inertia, lethargy, a hardened lava of ignorance, the Cavaliere saw a flow. The expatriate’s dancing city is often the local reformer’s or revolutionary’s immobilized one, ill-governed, committed to injustice. [...] The Cavaliere had never been as active, as stimulated, as alive mentally. As pleurably detached [...] so many performances here* (SONTAG, 1992, p. 21-22).

This speech image denounces two levels of discourse. On the one hand, Hamilton’s centric perspective which constructs Naples through the detaching lens of aesthetics, positing himself on the outside as if he were regarding a picture. Actually, he assumes the role of the passive, ruptured beholder Sontag had demanded for *avant garde* art that considered art on pure sensual grounds. On the other hand, Sontag, through the posited narrator, criticizes Hamilton’s limited version of reality by introducing the plight of the ex-centrics and deconstructing the imperialistic subject abroad.

Through this two fold speech image, then, Hamilton is ironically presented as a man who is unaware of any reproachable attitude in his behaviour since, as a representative of a superior culture he sees himself “as an envoy of decorum and reason” (SONTAG, 1992, p. 56). Even more. By tinging the narrative with an ironic tone that actually produces a gap between the way in which Hamilton regards himself and the way in which, through the narrative subject, she constructs him, Sontag counterposes the Cavaliere’s refinement to his crippled humanism since, for all his learning, his views did not take the cast of the philosophers he had come to admire. By narrating these events in an ironic fashion, then, Sontag actually does more than actually embellish her text: she unavoidably puts across an ideological formation.

Among the many identifications through which Sir William is constructed in the novel, he is textualized as a collector, revealing Sontag’s Modernism. It was a most suitable activity for someone who was ambassador to the Kingdom of Naples and the Two Sicilies in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, as due to the discovery of Pompeii and Herculaneum, there was ‘an outburst of antiquarian nostalgia’ (GAY, 1996, p. 291). With unsuppressed admiration, and a bit of sarcasm, Sontag has Hamilton define himself rather than as an Enlightened man as the epitome of the Enlightened collector: “I know, therefore I am. I collect, therefore I am. I am interested in everything, therefore, I am” (SONTAG, 1992, p. 111). This facet of Hamilton’s

identification bears a close resemblance with Sontag's aesthetic and intellectual bent.

In line with her "erotics of art", as spelled out in "Against Interpretation", Sontag seems to very much admire Hamilton for his aesthetic thrust and fully understand him in his role of collector in love with the pieces he has laboriously acquired. For all the emphasis on the contemplation of the beautiful, however, throughout the text aesthetics is actually pitched against ethics as Hamilton is also textualized as a lustful collector who had no scruples to steal valuable pieces that were part of the legacy of a foreign country and turning them into money.

In his desire to possess, Hamilton knows no limits. He devoids objects, cities, mountains, people of any significance they might have in order to turn them into motives for silent, aesthetic contemplation. From his perspective, the world is reduced from a three-dimensional to a two-dimensional plane. Naples, for example, is constructed as stimulating Hamilton's sense of sight "noblest of senses" (SONTAG, 1992, p. 45) thus awakening his desire to admire: "Even more than wanting to be admired, he liked admiring" (SONTAG, 1992, p. 23), and therefore collecting.

Of all the Neapolitan images the Cavaliere collected, the one he actually has a long lasting affair with is Mount Vesuvius, the object of his desire. "For him, the volcano was a stimulus for contemplation. Noisy as Vesuvius could be, it offered something like what he experienced with his collections. Islands of silence" (SONTAG, 1992, p. 82). Hence, it is constructed as his purest instance of collecting: "This was pure collecting, shorn of the prospect of profit. Nothing to buy or sell here. Of the volcano he could only make a gift to his glory and the glory of the volcano" (SONTAG, 1992, p. 27).

At another level, the volcano seems to be the metonymical figure that stands for Sontag's most precious artistic text, namely that which can be considered solely on aesthetic terms. Echoing her own words in "On Style", the second article in *Against Interpretation*, through her narrative subject, Sontag points out that Vesuvius' rocks seemed to contain the aesthetic perfection that the Cavaliere sought in all the objects he collected and that she attributed to Modernist art: "There was a moral in these stones. [They were] models of perfection and harmony" (SONTAG, 1992, p. 56). In fact, this is the moral of beauty that she puts forward in "Against Interpretation" when she says that "Art is connected with morality. [...] One way that it is so connected is that art may yield moral pleasure" (SONTAG, 1992, p. 24). It is due to this sublime beauty that the Cavaliere had the volcano and its rocks painted many times by his protégé Pietro Fabris and, in turn, Sontag had these engravings stamped in the covers of her novel.

Resorting to irony once more as the trope that in Postmodern fiction helps the writer "illustrate and incarnate her/his teachings" (HUTCHEON, 1988, p. 181), Sontag pursues her portrayal of the Cavaliere's aesthetic urge. When his first wife, Catherine, dies, he is constructed as undergoing a bout of depression to the point that even his passion for the volcano was in decline: "It was an aging of the senses and of his capacity for enthusiasm that he noted. He feels his gaze becoming dull, his hearing and taste less sharp" (SONTAG, 1992, p. 110) until he meets Emma, the passion that comes to replace, or better, complement, the volcano. A different signifier for the same signified: beauty. Reducing her once again to the status of one of his valuable possessions, he is constructed as "[collecting] the young woman" (SONTAG, 1992, p. 138).

And Hamilton actually molds Emma to suit his classical taste in art. She sits for many historical paintings, the rage of the time, which the Cavaliere does not hesitate to sell when, at the end of his life once back in London, he is in debt. From a Feminist stand that also reads as a criticism of Hamilton's extreme aesthetic urge, Sontag (1992, p. 44) constructs him as a Pygmalion in reverse, turning his Fair One [Emma] into a statue" as he actually educates her: "she was naturally very intelligent (SONTAG, 1992, p. 134), with the purpose of converting her into the most valuable piece of his collection: "Beauty must be exhibited. And beauty can be taught how best to exhibit itself" (SONTAG, 1992, p. 133). More than a woman, then, Emma becomes for him an object of contemplation, his own statues alive. His craving for sensual pleasure reaches its peak when he teaches her to bring to life his collection of classical statues through the performance of the "Attitudes", a kind of theatrical act in which, with the help of a few shawls, Emma, who had a gift for acting, impersonated the Greek and Roman deities painted on the Cavaliere's vases: "She is the Cavaliere's gallery of living statues" (SONTAG, 1992, p. 131).

The conjoining of the political and the aesthetic is overtly reenacted in the novel when the echoes of the French Revolution reach Naples and the charming sight gains ideological depth as it becomes the scenario for the fight between the royalist and the Jacobins: "The Cavaliere's mazy backwater, so rewardingly isolated from transforming events, was being dragged into what passed for the real world, the one defined by the threat of France" (SONTAG, 1992, p. 184-185).

Upon this new scenario in which the aesthetic is surpassed by the political, Hamilton is unable to function. He is constructed as retreating within the boundaries of his aesthetic realm as reality presses upon it. In the present miasma he only worries about saving his collections and in so doing he becomes even more tied to his aestheticized image of life:

*That was the mood this summer, when Naples was waiting for the French to charge down the peninsula, and the Cavaliere, fortunate in being able to anticipate well in advance the end of the privileged life he'd known [...] made his inventory and started to think about how to evacuate his most prized possessions (SONTAG, 1992, p. 204).*

Criticism becomes even more pointed when Naples falls in the hands of the Jacobins and Nelson is called by the King and Queen of Naples to restore order in their country. Rather than reacting against Nelson's ruthless behaviour and take an active role to help his old acquaintances and friends, collectors and men of science like him who write begging him to intercede for them, he turns a blind eye to the atrocious acts and cowardly retreats into his aesthetic world.

Along the same lines, Hamilton's shallow Voltarianism is deconstructed as just another instance of his snobbery. For him, literature and art in general should be for the sole contentment of the senses rather than as a means to mold one's views upon the world, not different from what Sontag herself had called for in her essays. When he learns that many of his intellectual Neapolitan friends have joined the Jacobin cause, he is candidly made to reflect:

*Who could have predicted that Voltaire's mockery of received ideas would one day be taken as an invitation to tear down lawful arrangements in the best interest of order and stability? Who other than the naive and benighted, felt they must put into practice what they had enjoyed in the book? (SONTAG, 1992, p. 231).*

And even more pointedly ironic, he is made to add in an aside: “(Had his passion for the artifacts of ancient Rome led him to the worship of Jupiter and Minerva?)” (SONTAG, 1992, p. 231). All his interpretation had been rightly reduced to contours and beautiful shapes since only the “naïve” could understand art as a statement on life: “Unfortunately, some of his distinguished friends in Naples had done just that. He feared they would pay a heavy price for their naivete” (SONTAG, 1992, p. 231). For him “...to read was precisely to enter another world, which was not the reader’s own, and come back refreshed, ready to bear with equanimity the injustices and frustrations of this one” (SONTAG, 1992, p. 231) and continue, as always, within one’s frame of mind.

For all that has been said so far, then, I believe that *The Volcano Lover* can be read as an instance of slippage from Sontag’s former Formalist stand. Firstly, through the ironic narrativization of the Cavaliere’s totalizing aesthetic views, I think that she actually mocks the hermeticism of her own approach to the literary text, according to which aesthetics should be the only dominant in literature in an attempt to reduce it to pure sensorial expression. Secondly, she explicitly brings into her text the theme of the ex-centrics as well as historiographic events from a critical viewpoint, lending to her narrative an unavoidable ideological twist and thus contesting her views as expressed in “Against Interpretation” that the novel cannot be taken as a social, political or cultural declaration about the world.

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Resumo: Este artigo traz uma leitura do romance *The Volcano Lover* (1992), da ensaísta norte-americana Susan Sontag. O objetivo é tentar mostrar que no âmbito desse romance a autora desconstrói a sua postura teórica, a respeito da literatura, na sua adesão ao “European High Modernism”, desenvolvido a partir de seu já clássico livro de ensaios *Against Interpretation* (1966).

Palavras-chave: Crítica; estética; romance.