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# A Lover is Never A Sceptic: Five Fragments on The Volcano Lover

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*A Lover is Never a Sceptic*  
Five Fragments on *The Volcano Lover*

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Under the Advisement of Yoon-Sun Lee

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of the Prerequisite  
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## *Introduction*

“Be serious, be passionate, wake up.”<sup>1</sup>

Susan Sontag loved everything. She was voracious. If it belonged in the world, she wanted it. That is to say, she wanted to know.

These are hyperbolic sentences, but had Sontag all the time she wanted, they wouldn't be. Sontag's son, David Rieff, wrote that “Indeed, if I had only one word with which to evoke her, it would be *avidity*.”<sup>2</sup> Sontag's posthumously published journal entries, dominated by sprawling lists of words, films, and books she loved, show her provoked by this “avidity” from a young age. In her own *Paris Review* interview, she explains that as a child she passed from aspiring to being a chemist (following her hero, Marie Curie) to being a doctor until, with sweeping finality, “literature swamped me. What I really wanted was *every kind of life*, and the writer's life seemed the most inclusive.”<sup>3</sup>

The literary disposition became Sontag's vehicle. It was her mode of approaching the objects she was curious about – as though by reading thoroughly enough, pursuing ideas doggedly enough, she could satisfy this desire for living in “every kind.” Being that Sontag wanted to know about the entire world, the literary posture also became the way which she apprehended everything in it. (Like Barthes, she could not separate “life” from “work.”) Sontag's comment about her “inclusive life” is a figurative description of this tendency; others, however,

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<sup>1</sup> Garis, Leslie. “Susan Sontag Finds Romance.” *New York Times*. August 2, 1992, <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/08/02/books/booksspecial/sontag-romance.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed April 10, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Rieff, David. “Foreword,” in *At the Same Time*, by Susan Sontag, eds. Paolo Dinardo and Anne Jump. (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2007), p. xiii.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Sontag, “The Art of Fiction CXLIII,” interview by Edward Hirsch. *Paris Review*, no. 137, Winter 1995, p. 195.

have claimed the agency to read Sontag's "inclusiveness" far more literally. The poet and cultural critic Wayne Koestenbaum has written that Sontag "ate the world... Cosmophagic, Sontag gobbled up sensations, genres, concepts. She swallowed political and aesthetic movements. She devoured roles... She tried to prove how much a human life – a writer's life – could include."<sup>4</sup>

"Cosmophagy," an amalgam of Koestenbaum's own, means, literally, world-eating. Combining the Greek "cosmos," for "order" or "world," with "phagy," "eat," it conjures the sense of a sweeping hunger. Sontag's fiction offers a portrait of a matching mouth: in the first moments of *The Volcano Lover*, the narrator points to the Vesuvius, and states, "It's the mouth of a volcano. Yes, mouth; and lava tongue... It emits, ejects. It is also an interior, an abyss" (5). As in Koestenbaum's neologism, the land's geography is posited also as the stand-in for desire. "Like passion, whose emblem it is, it can die" (7). The volcano and Sontag are parallel in their vitality; Sontag herself even slyly admits as much in the novel's epigraph, a first-person slice from Mozart's *Così fan tutte* that reads, "Nel petto un Vesuvio d'averne mi par." *I have a Vesuvius in my heart*. Delightfully – because it tantalizes, and then resists, this ascription – we feel in *The Volcano Lover*'s Vesuvius that we catch fleeting shades, moments, flashes of her.

Bluntly glossed, Sontag's career from the earliest juvenilia to her final essays pursues a preoccupation with "the status of art and what, if anything, it does in the world."<sup>5</sup> This unrelenting question might be recast as a concern with reality and its mediation – though even the tenability of this paraphrase raises some of the issues Sontag's career takes up. To suppose, for one, that a reality might be "mediated" is already to imply a series of claims that must be

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<sup>4</sup> Wayne Koestenbaum, *My 1980s* (New York: FSG Originals, 2013), p. 236.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Ching and Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor, "Introduction: Unextinguished," in *The Scandal of Susan Sontag*, ed. Barbara Ching and Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 2.

tested. At its simplest, the statement requires that something is affected (“mediated”) by a work, and thus, in turn, posits that the the work possesses motion as well as agency; that it enjoys a degree of causal independence. Like the Vesuvius in *The Volcano Lover*, it could be “Something alive, that can die. Something inert that becomes agitated, now and then” (6).

Sontag’s oeuvre might thus be conceptualized as a series of moves towards building some functional understanding of the interminably complicated relations between “work” and “world.” *Against Interpretation* (1966) and *Styles of Radical Will* (1969) have Sontag closely reading the aesthetic problems broached by contemporary literature and art. Each of Sontag’s monographs, *On Photography* (1977), *Illness as Metaphor* (1978), *AIDS and its Metaphors* (1988), and *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) all have as their express concern the potentially, and, often, *damaging* work that representative strategies like imaging (photography) and verbal equivalence (metaphor) exact on their subject matter.

*The Volcano Lover* fits evenly into this constellation, vitally illustrating the continuity between represented and representation. While the novel *depicts* situations of mediation (the most obvious of these being the various attempts to capture Emma’s beauty on canvas), it also meditates in the self-reflexive register by centering on a history that injects Sontag’s novel with the shadow of “real” referents. This thesis explores the various uses of voice and representation examined in Sontag’s novel. Sontag’s account of desire is contextualized in a nebulae of other literary and critical discussions of the topic. The impetus and action of the “Lover” in the title – one who is obsessive, thorough, and often attracted to the idiosyncratic – is also revealed as both aesthetic and embodied.

These notes are conveyed in a series of short chapters, or “fragments.” The fragment style moves in two directions. On the one hand, its ellipses leave intervals, land to complete traversing

later on. On the other hand, it suggests an inconclusiveness that is itself an admission of interminability. The collection of fragments does not aim to encapsulate; I cannot imagine their completion. Rather, they prefer to work in the suggestive mode, permitting elision and evocation, privileging these qualities above the final assertion.

Permission to leave the question open, to return to an argument woven earlier and to rework its threads, was an impulse Sontag knew well. It is a characteristic gesture of Sontag's to structure a work as chips arranged in meditated assembly. *Against Interpretation* is littered with titles that declare their partiality: "Reflections on...", "A Note on...", "Notes on...". Nor did she find the form or its implications exhaustible: almost fifteen years after the publication of the fragment-filled *Against Interpretation*, in a journal entry from the spring of 1980, Sontag enthusiastically scribbles, "Yes, an essay on aphoristic thinking! Another ending, wrapping up. 'Notes on Notes.'"<sup>6</sup>

Editors of the most recent critical compendium on Sontag, Barbara Ching and Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor, suggest that Sontag found part of the essay's allure in its being "ruled by... a resistance to ending."<sup>7</sup> This resistance feels appropriate here, too, in a thesis that is decidedly not angled at developing an analysis of one "theme." Because *The Volcano Lover* is not yet among the collection of contemporary American novels that have received book-length treatments, there is a more urgent sense of needing to attend to the local. Paying close attention to the book on its own terms seems to me the most expedient (and, for the reader, pleasure-promising) method of making a case for the novel entire. What I want is to address the knots of concern registered as we look *across* it, survey-like.

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<sup>6</sup> Susan Sontag, *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh* (New York: Picador, 2013), p. 516.

<sup>7</sup> Ching & Wagner-Lawlor, "Introduction: Unextinguished," p. 4.

And yet, even so, this attempt to render a “more inclusive” account (in Sontag’s own words) is thwarted from its inception. Whether it is taken as a self-contained, independent text or as a nexus emblemizing Sontag’s “classic” concerns (art, mediation, women, politics; passions), *The Volcano Lover* remains, in both cases, complexly layered. The consequence is that I inevitably judge my own work to be deficient, because partial: there is such a great mass left to say, ask, see.

Above all, it is my hope that this work will assert Sontag’s preeminence in the canon of contemporary American fiction. Though it is built from arguments – about Sontag’s regeneration of the narrator, about beauty, about vision and writing and desire – the only real persuasion attempted here will be towards showing why Sontag’s novel is not only exceptional, emotionally and theoretically complex in the way that only the great novels can be, but also worthy of study and of regard.

Perhaps, then, it is also to illustrate how I was seduced.

In “Advice to the Young,” an essay collected along with “Susan Sontag, Cosmophage” in *My 1980s*, Wayne Koestenbaum tersely declares, “My advice: refuse to accept diversions.”<sup>8</sup> When I read this sentence in the fall of 2014, when it became lodged in my mind like driftwood stalled in a river. Perhaps it was because I was reading Sontag’s journals at the same time, and detected in them a drive and insatiability that suggested a woman who lived always by Koestenbaum’s precept. This determination moved me. (It still seems true that no eighteen year-old I can picture would fail to be caught by this ravenous mind with its dexterous intellect, nor the willful, ardent, often selfish – or, rather, self-oriented – passion evinced by the traces of Sontag’s private hand.)

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<sup>8</sup> Koestenbaum, *My 1980s*, p. 30.



Though the allusions to critical texts that follow have been chosen for their usefulness to Sontag's context, I freely admit to only choosing what I adore.<sup>9</sup> The attraction does not need to be total, for there are different charms, and a diverse range of responses that might follow from them. (The variety of loves is one of the topics *The Volcano Lover* inventories and digests well.) Only, like the narrator whose commanding voice opens *The Volcano Lover* as she sifts through the profuse offerings of the summertime market stall, I register its magnetism to me, and pursue as consequence of that interest.

Many of these sources called upon bear no obvious relevance to the study of Sontag's work; they are not materials conventionally discussed together or seen as answering directly to one another. And yet, in each there seemed to me a vein where these voices ring naturally compatible. It was in this vein that I began to want to invite them into the text. I suspect that in my case the possibility of conversation arose only because I came to most of these texts as a reader who had long since internalized Sontag's concerns – her styles, her predilections. After Sontag, everything I touched I touched as the possessor of a sensibility whose wakefulness was, first of all, already made up of *her* fascinations.

The axis of concerns that structures Sontag's intellectual pursuits has, doubtless due to her own insistent writing, acquired its own terminology. Her obsession over the reconciliation of the aesthetic and the ethical – this essential characteristic of her sensibility – is often called “seriousness,” following her own use of the word (as in the imperative to “be serious” included in the epigraph of this introduction). Ching & Wagner-Lawlor define it as “a quality linking the aesthetic, the ethical, and the political in an attentive person's experience of the world.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> “I am not at all interested in writing about work I don't admire.” Susan Sontag, “The Art of Fiction CXLIII,” p. 192.

<sup>10</sup> Ching & Wagner-Lawlor, “Introduction: Unextinguished,” p. 2.

The primacy of attention in the composition of a great artist and moral person is an early fixation for Sontag, and we find a treatment of one such “serious” and attentive exemplar in her first collection of critical writing: Simone Weil, the French philosopher and mystic whose death in 1943 is often cast as the consequence of a hunger strike she undertook out of solidarity with the victims of the Second World War. In her eponymously titled essay on Weil, published in *Against Interpretation* (1966), Sontag asserts that we read writers like her because of “their personal authority, for the example of their seriousness, for their manifest willingness to sacrifice themselves for their truths, and – only piecemeal – for their ‘views.’”<sup>11</sup>

Though in “Simone Weil,” Sontag’s prose shies from idolizing her subject outright, an incomplete sense of aspiration hums beneath the essay’s self-effacing tone – especially knowing, now, the dominance of “seriousness” in Sontag’s diaries and later writing. Biographer Richard Rees captures Weil’s eccentric allure when he concludes, “As for her death, whatever explanation one may give of it will amount in the end to saying that she died of love.”<sup>12</sup> Weil embodied the artistic and philosophical personality that Sontag most respected. This project began like Sontag’s essay: out of admiration, fixation.

Sontag grows, over the course of her career, into more easily admitting that it is partly a devotional impetus that motivates her writing. Both Elias Canetti and E.M. Cioran were writers Sontag loved (though you’d not immediately know it from the tone she uses in the essays on that were published in *Against Interpretation*). But, in the same 1980 journal entry referenced above, she describes the qualities of the beloved aphorism in terms of its manifestation in their work: “In Canetti, as in Cioran, aphorism is the skill (product) appropriate to the over-passionate mind

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<sup>11</sup> Susan Sontag, “Simone Weil,” in *Essays of the 1960s & 70s* (New York: Library of America, 2013), p. 54.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Rees, *Simone Weil: A Sketch for a Portrait* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 191.

of the eternal student.”<sup>13</sup> By now, Sontag can frame her attraction to the form in terms of her reverence for its users (the “over-passionate” Canetti, and Cioran – and, by implication, Weil and Barthes). Of this reverence, Rieff tells us that “the appropriateness of such worship was, for my mother, self-evident, and she practiced it until she could no longer practice anything at all, so much was it second nature to her.”<sup>14</sup>

Like Sontag, those who populate the literature about her have had their own trouble mediating personal, emotional responses (often quite intense) contra the presumed detachment requested of the critical position. When the literary critic Terry Castle re-approached an essay she had written about “Notes on Camp” to prepare it for anthology publication, she realized that there was an odd air of detachment, one that “held at bay... any hint of the personal: any sense of the roiling, arm-flapping, flowing-scarved, silver-maned emotions that Sontag... automatically invokes in me.”<sup>15</sup> When reworking her piece, Castle reproves her prior detachment, proclaiming instead “dispassion be damned.”<sup>16</sup>

Castle’s subject was her own dispassion, but for Sontag, all detachment (even the inevitable – of time, of representation) was dubious. She wanted passion, commitment, proximity to matter. She wanted writers “to depict the realities: the foul realities, the realities of rapture. It is the essence of the wisdom furnished by literature... to help us understand that, whatever is happening, something else is always going on.”<sup>17</sup> This is how Sontag’s devoted, almost amorous criticism holds water: because she embraces both the foul and the rapturous, because she

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<sup>13</sup> Sontag, *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh*, p. 516.

<sup>14</sup> Rieff, “Foreword,” p. xv.

<sup>15</sup> Terry Castle, “Some Notes on ‘Notes on Camp,’” in *The Scandal of Susan Sontag*, eds. Barbara Ching and Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 21.

<sup>16</sup> Castle, “Some Notes on ‘Notes on Camp,’” p. 22.

<sup>17</sup> Susan Sontag, “The Conscience of Words,” in *At the Same Time* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2007), p. 151.

possessed the commitment to the gaze that most punishingly quested for the true, she avoided the rose-tinting of infatuation – the love she wrote out of could be genuine.

This is not all to say that Sontag's career can be entirely accounted for by reference to some overarching luminous credo. The questions that motivate her work – about reconciling the loves of art and goodness, of beauty and truth – are, in all frankness, interminable. *The Volcano Lover* is a novel about the very tendencies that drove Sontag as a writer, a woman, a thinker, and a human being, but its pursuit of these questions refuses didacticism and its deadened slack; instead, it vitalizes. Dramatizes, as a way of extracting the material that lassitude binds into easy answers. Sontag claimed that “The wisdom that becomes available over a profound, lifelong engagement with the aesthetic cannot, I venture to say, be duplicated by any other kind of seriousness.” In *The Volcano Lover*, she tests whether and to what limits her own pronouncement is true. Here, Sontag hunts, searching for the limits of what she is willing to venture. These are notes by an avid observer of that journey.

**A Consuming Voice**

“Something that speaks to me. To my longings. Speaks to, speaks of. Ah...” (3)

The first act in *The Volcano Lover* is an instruction. A voice imposes, asks you to see: “It is the entrance to a flea market.” Yet, though it begins by indicating the set, there is no hewing towards the vividness of detail, the acute sensuous attention, that relays the world we are about to encounter. Instead, we largely feel the direction of a dictating voice. We are aware not only of being plunged into place (as is fiction’s spark), but also of the constructing actor who tips us so. The market is described, a few gestures made to grasping its characteristics, but these quickly turn into an examination of the landscape’s allure: “No charge. Admittance free. Sloppy crowds. Vulpine, larking. Why enter? What do you expect to see? I’m seeing. I’m checking on what’s in the world” (3).

These clunky first words, “it is,” are an indication of the kind of the mental work that strategies of realism work to obfuscate. Like the “I” of “I’m seeing,” and “I’m checking,” Sontag dramatizes the act of conjuring that permits fiction’s scene-setting to take place. What kind of narrator is this? And how are we meant to conceive of the relationship between voice and story, given its particular constitution?

The life of Sir William Hamilton (1730-1803) serves as the primary scaffold around which the narrative of *The Volcano Lover* is generated. Hamilton was the British envoy to the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and lived in Naples from 1764. He, his wife Emma Hamilton, along with the Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson, left Italy in 1800 after the reverberating revolutionary energies of the Storming of the Bastille traveled south; these events “took him up

out of a life lived at ease in rational pleasure into the very dirty world of war, revolution, betrayal, and reprisal.”<sup>18</sup>

Hamilton is converted in Sontag’s novel into “the Cavaliere,” who, as the inside jacket of the novel states, is the former’s “fictional double.” The novel, divided into four “Parts,” follows his life in Naples beginning in 1773: Part I details his life with his first wife, the wealthy Catherine Barlow (referred to in the novel as “Catherine”), and ends with the grief he is surprised to be afflicted with after she dies. Part II begins with the introduction of his second wife, Emma Lyon. The change she catalyzes in his life is major, as the first sentence of the section declares: “Nothing can match the elation of the chronically melancholy when joy arrives” (119). This portion, the largest in the book, portrays their life together, Emma’s gradual ascension from “common” girl to noble lady, the arrival of Admiral Horatio Lord Nelson, Emma’s affair with him, and the group’s flight from Naples as a consequence of political instability introduced by the French Revolution. Part III, entirely composed of the Cavaliere’s free indirect discourse, has him speak from a half-wakeful state at the smudged edge of death. Part IV is split into four sections itself, each one a direct address from a female character in the novel who has, in a sense, yet to have her say.

The expectation that one can reduce a work to an “about” structure suggests a belief that one can cleanly editorialize – that there is one primary concern that eclipses all others when giving a sufficiently comprehensive account of a text. “About” describes and ascribes a heart from which secondary characteristics emanate – a tendency that *The Volcano Lover* itself mocks when the narrator explains that, to the Cavaliere, “The world seemed made of concentric circles of mockery. At the center the Cavaliere pivots with Jack” (81). Never mind the obvious

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<sup>18</sup> David Constantine, *Fields of Fire: A Life of Sir William Hamilton* (London: Phoenix, 2001), p. 144.

solipsism of structuring the world around one's own "mockery," or that Jack is the pet monkey the Cavaliere has recently acquired, the subject of many of the novel's gag lines – in the context of the tempestuous political and social forces that the novel emphasizes, the movements of its characters, and also the concerns of its voice, this "seeming" of the world to "pivot" around them feels weak, illusory.

If the protagonist is conceived as a propulsive force – that is, as the dominant structural principle that motivates the novel's movement – then the disclosure of a protagonist's "inner reality" is of much import. From a strictly mechanical point of view, this "inwardness" becomes a field of possibility from which the novelist can conjure the material of her narrative. If the thoughts and actions of protagonists are the central, organizing principles of novels, then it's not unexpected that we should also request to identify with them – or, at the very least, in our readings of them, sense a significant interiority.

The Cavaliere is the one whose experience makes up the backbone of the novel upon our entrée, and his is the mind whose is most elaborated by Sontag's free indirect discourse. Although this free indirect discourse is applied to many of the characters we meet (including those only briefly present in the novel) and although, through it, Sontag inures *The Volcano Lover* to a tone of genuine polyphony, the Cavaliere's story is the staple to which we return. The calendar dates of the Cavaliere's timeline, the developments in his health, and places that Hamilton visited and lived in are the material that dictate the novel's foci. Consequently, the "map" of characters that Sontag's novelistic voice tracks also revolve around Hamilton, and is composed primarily of those with whom he was in contact.

To say, then, that Hamilton does not in fact qualify as *The Volcano Lover's* "protagonist" is to point out that his seeming fulfilment of the conditions that would qualify him as such are

lacking. There is a barrier to our being able to adhere to the view that he is the novel's protagonist, which either means that our definition of the protagonist is too conventional or that Sontag is doing something else with the category.

Perhaps the sense of unease about describing the Cavaliere as the novel's central character is a result of the fact that by no means is the free indirect discourse that composes Hamilton's thought the dominating presence in the novel. It is "enclosed" within that of the novel's *primary* narrator, the unnamed and un-located voice that opens the novel and to whom we often return. Instead of being "about" the Cavaliere, the subject of the novel is its voice as surface and as texture. Though it conveys a series of events that may be collated into a "story," summarized – as I have done in the above paragraph about the novel's four Parts – it is told in a language that purposefully resists being read "through." Not only is the voice one that relentlessly foregrounds itself and its operations, it also wilfully engages in the novel's different grains of temporality and reality to forge a surface; by turning the emergence of this field into one of the "events," if not part of the "story," Sontag decenters narrative from the conventional task of depicting character psychology and the like, instead offering a stage of what it means to be truly polyphonous.

There are at least two frameworks of disclosure at work in *The Volcano Lover*. One of these is the more overarching critical voice, the voice that tempts us to consider itself Sontag's judgmental emissary in the novel. A significant portion of Part One adheres to this nameless and time-defying narrator. The other frame is that which appears to qualify as the more conventionally encountered "free indirect discourse," and which relays the characters' experiences. Because the novel begins with the primary, self-aware voice of the figure seemingly far displaced from its Neapolitan subject matter, it seems to be an "enclosure" in which are held a



polyphony of voices, events, and stories (“stories” and “narrative” needing to be differentiated because the former terms refers to “the signified or narrative content,” while the latter refers to “the signifier, statement, discourse or narrative text itself”<sup>19</sup>).

Certainly the novel’s lack of punctuation in cases of correspondence or dialogue suggests a refusal to demarcate voices as distinct from one another: in this, the narrator enacts its own hunger impulse, the desire to swallow voices and to speak out of many different tongues, many different registers. The relevance of such a practice – the ability to produce utterances from different points of view – is perhaps illustrated best not by any self-referring explication of the tendency, but rather by an action of Emma’s. The Cavaliere remembers a dinner party at which his wife tells a story, but during the course of listening he realizes that, in fact, what Emma describes “had happened to [the Cavaliere] a quarter of a century earlier, to him and Catherine” (172). The Cavaliere undergoes a series of reactions, until:

“finally he felt neither embarrassed nor anxious nor disillusioned nor alarmed nor annoyed nor saddened... but touched, immensely, joyously moved by this sign of how much a part of him she felt, to the point of such total surrender of her dear person to his care and tutelage that she no longer knew where she left off and he began. It seemed like an act of love.” (172)

In this view, it no longer seems appropriate to refer to Sontag’s novel as being disclosed by a “voice” – the phrase implies unity, distinctiveness, and a finite enclosure; it implies a single register, one mind. But this is a speech that seems to be composed of many different subjectivities. At the beginning of the book, the speaker asks, of the market, “Why enter?” and proceeds to candidly assert its own interests. The inward presence gathers up personality by referring to its individual predilections: “there may be something valuable, there. Not valuable, exactly. But something *I* would want” (3). Unlike the conventional third-person omniscience that

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<sup>19</sup> Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 27.

is largely without individuation, the call-and-response here discloses a presence that possesses a specific want, which suggests, in turn, a personal psychology. It is this twist which begins to suggest a distinct subject, and which permits the speaking voice to shade more into the domain of weighted character than of transparent vessel.

The note in which Sontag claims “My Cavaliere is Sir William Hamilton’s double, a fictional character...” is located on the inside jacket of the book, and thus exists outside the “body” of the fictional text. While the following chapters, which commence after the “PROLOGUE” heading, blur and contest categories of “character,” “narrator,” and “author,” the fact that this part is placed before that marker leaves us comfortably able to presume that the voice speaking here is Sontag’s own. The possessiveness signaled by the “My” by which the note begins is, then, much more easily construed as issuing from the author’s own speech. Here, it’s the text’s producer – Sontag herself – indicating a direct ownership over not just her work, but also the subjects within it.

Because of a claim as explicit as this one on the inner cover, it is tempting to immediately read this animating consciousness that seems to direct the movements of the narrative frame as Sontag’s inviting herself into the novel. This voice that not only speaks of there being “something *I* would want,” but which also makes pronouncements about being at the edge of a flea market in “Manhattan, spring of 1992” (4), seems to skew towards being an injection of the author’s un-fictional position into the narrative. But the language with which the events are relayed refuses this ease: instead, it dramatizes the way that it can both rivet to, fail to fulfill, and mislead its receiver. Soon after this initial disclosure of qualities that shadow Sontag’s own, there is a turn where the narrator-voice seems to disclose herself – only to reveal that very disclosure itself to be fraudulent. There is a moment in which it states “Me? But I’ve done nothing,” these

two sentences seem to remain adhered to the prior narrative consciousness disclosed in the flea market elaboration. Yet, in the next two sentences, there is a shift: “I just happened to be there, mired in my rustic routines. Where else should I live, I was born here, wails the dark-skinned villager” (6).

Without suggesting anything about the shift beforehand, the “I” of the text swiftly moves from the contemporary market-excavator to “the dark-skinned villager.” The novel’s *momentum* brings us to this next sentence, but whether the voice has led us here, has followed, or has accompanied, is unclear. That the speaker of this second “I” is “the dark-skinned villager,” and that this is disclosed until only after the “I” asserts itself (“Me?”), suggests an instability to the novel’s use of the first person. The first two sentences (“Me? But I’ve done nothing,”) enact, in a distilled fashion, narrative ventriloquism, and therefore force us to confront the artifice of narrative. Because the revelation that the voice is here being employed to the end of conveying the thoughts of the villager comes *after* the initial pointing-at-oneself (“Me?”), Sontag enacts how easily a persona can be posited, and how quickly it can be taken back, revealed as construction.

This small fragment emblemizes in microcosm the structure by which *The Volcano Lover*’s voice operates throughout: it generates uncertainty as to whether we readers are being led and tracked by a consistent, univocal “narrator,” motivated by a subjectivized unity lurking behind it, or whether we are slipping, faced with an inevitable indeterminacy. Peter Wollen, in *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, describes how the meaning of the pronoun

“varies from message to message. . . This is because it is determined by the particular existential context. Thus when I say ‘I’, there is an existential bond between this utterance and myself, of which the hearer must be aware to grasp the significance of what is being said. Pronouns have a symbolic aspect – they denote the ‘source’ of an utterance,

in general terms – which makes them comprehensible on one level, at least, even when the actual identity of the source is unknown.”<sup>20</sup>

The difficulty, in terms of clutching onto whether or not the animating presence who stands at the door of the market is Sontag or not, is the same kind of difficulty Wollen describes; the simultaneous comprehensibility and mystery of an unattributed personal pronoun. Here, because we cannot tell when it enters and when it departs, the space “behind” the novel’s emergent language is composed of subjects that shift alternately into view and out of range, as though bacteria running beneath the circular frame of a microscope. A better term for the mode deployed in *The Volcano Lover* would take account of the fact that the prevailing fusing force is simply the temporal succession of one sentence having to follow after another.

Essential to an accurate description of the voice is an account of the sense of their being different “levels” of truth in the narrative, generating friction against each other. The critical voice has a view from the wide-angle, mentioning events so far into the future that if the characters were ever privy to them, they’d seem like fantasy (television, Hiroshima, etc). Even in a “tighter” sense, by its privileged knowledge of the world the Cavaliere and his cohort live in, as well as its commitment to broaching the plight of Naples’ poor and weak – a realm we do not see any of the named characters consider much – the narrative voice separates itself from the “type” of reality that the characters live in.

Phrases used to frame these vignettes at the beginning of the narrative carry details that suggest their fictional status is shared, rather than disparate. Immediately before the flea market scene is cut and the narrative turns to observing the Cavaliere and his nephew at a picture auction, the narrator declares “I go in” (4) – a declaration paralleled by the “They went out” that

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<sup>20</sup> Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1987) p. 142.

concludes the Cavaliere and Charles' shared scene. The shared syntax and lack of direct reference to what, exactly, it is that they are going "in" and "out" of might gesture – in opposition to the conventional split between the realm of a fictional "story" and its metafictional "commentary" – to a shared landscape.

But the landscape is not shared because there is any inherent compatibility. Rather, it is shared because the novel's language – the microscope quality – is riveted to what Genette calls the "linearity of the linguistic signifier."<sup>21</sup> The term refers to the implacable nature of time and its forcing the uni-directional movement, from *this* word to *this* one. The necessarily inevitable temporality of reading is evoked as a way of reconciling the the ostensible incompatibility of these disparate modes. Another one of the novel's interrogative "Why enter?" instances extends the question by relating it to the time it takes to look, perhaps to read: "Have you that much spare time? You'll look. You'll stray. You'll lose track of time" (3). The last three sentences here are indication of a causal sequence: by gazing, one is taken. And in being taken, moments pass.

Genette gives terminology to describe the text's tendencies for seeking backwards and glaring ahead: "prolepsis" is "any narrative maneuver that consists of narrating or evoking in advance an event that will take place later," and "analepsis" is "any evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point in the story where we are at any given moment."<sup>22</sup> The difficulty of describing utterances in Sontag's novel with either term comes from the fact that there is no certainty about what register of time should serve as the "anchor" against which we read the relative temporality of contrasting parts of the text. In that sense, she illustrates a question that Genette's theory does not adequately address by relying on an assumption that "the point in the story where we are at any given moment" is not exploded – or, at the very least,

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<sup>21</sup> Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, p. 34.

<sup>22</sup> Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, p. 40.

severely problematized – by the contradictory levels of temporal register. That is, if we take the critical narrative voice’s “contemporary” point of view as the location of Genette’s “point in the story,” then all the material relaying the Neapolitan characters’ story becomes analepsis.

Sometimes, the language tracks forward, but the mind does not entirely follow: insofar as language is posited as able to relay consciousness, *The Volcano Lover* couples the inexpressibility of a desired object with the dissolution of the individual consciousness’ ability to generate speech. When the subject of desire gets closer to being intimated, language is confronted as insufficient, and with certitude about the subject so too do we lose our certitude about the one who wants: “Want to rescue. Something that speaks to me. To my longings. Speaks to, speaks of, ah...” In this “ah,” the desire surpasses speech – it becomes unspecifiable. The emergence of a subject behind the language is suffocated by the shortcoming of language’s capacity to match the subject’s experience, the magnitude or specificities of its desire. While it is the speaker’s intense certainty about the specific nature of their desires that gives them the sense of being independent and personal, the subject of that desire seems too vast, too wild – too *something* – to be encompassed by the mere tools at hand. When the words falter, the presence recedes.

The eleven pages of Part III, spoken entirely out of the Cavaliere’s voice on his deathbed, exhibit this tendency for us. This section is composed of two paragraphs, split only by the Cavaliere’s unconsciousness (the second half begins, “I feel clearer now. To sleep was refreshing,” 369). Here, the Cavaliere’s thoughts associatively engender each other. For instance, considering Catherine’s death, the Cavaliere remarks

“She was very tired. I believe she is resting now in her room. Many persons want to rest. After reaching the shore, Pliny felt tired and a sheet was spread on the ground for him to lie down for a brief rest, from which he never recovered.” (363)

These four sentences exhibit in miniature the way the Cavaliere's mind starts to slide between meanings. The "tiredness" the Cavaliere remembers from before her death turns into a picture of her sleeping nearby; the thought of her sleeping reminds him of other famous sleepers, and from there he pictures Pliny on what will become his wet grave.

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"Indeed, practically all metaphors for style amount to placing matter on the inside, style on the outside. It would be more to the point to reverse the metaphor. The matter, the subject, is on the outside; the style is on the inside."<sup>23</sup>

The "matter" of the novel is the suggestion of a Sontag figure, the cast of characters who populate Naples, the objects that the Cavaliere collects, the great, hulking mouth of the Vesuvius. The "style" is the principle that allows each of these elements, belonging to separate registers of reality and of time, to be weaved together.

*The Volcano Lover's* language is a style – an endorsement of texture rather than depth. Here, language is exhibited as shading meanings of one term into another and confusing the speaker's relationship to the world as a result. This is why the novel, as utterance, has to take up a style that privileges the quilted surface texture of polyphony over any kind of unequivocal attempt to "capture."

Language is revealed as summoning up, constructing rather than revealing. The voice comes down like a veil. It seems that behind one side there is the implied presence behind the individuated, desiring "I," and that, on the other, there is the un-fictional original behind the "Cavaliere." But in both cases, the existence of that presence is unconfirmed – in fact, it's dodged, and may as well be dismissed. It appears after everything that the "veil" the novel's polyphony seems to create is, in fact, the surface upon which all these different implications of

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<sup>23</sup> Susan Sontag, "On Style," in *Essays of the 1960s & 70s* (New York: Library of America, 2013), p. --.

subjects can be conjured. The narrative voice, the impulse that animates it, drives it, dictates what it does, is a point of paradox, a resting point, between the inability to find what is “behind” the language, on either side.

The novel’s strategy of disclosure is one that accepts that narrative voice can neither successfully reveal the author’s fixed presence nor refer confidently to the figures that populate the story it relays. Finally, this voice is both surface and enclosure – the consequence of unslakeable hunger. Its critical-voiced aspect is animated by the suggestion of an authorial figure behind, a shadowy, barely-disclosed figure motivates the novel’s dynamism. This is the figure that is the source of the energy that recombines language into the pursuit for the flesh of the mythical figures that lie “behind,” on the other side – the other face of distance and time.



## *Two*

### *In the Universe of History Painting*

“Then there are all the stories told about me, some false, most of them true.” (404)

*The Volcano Lover* at once depicts and enacts the hunt instigated by desire. While we watch the primary pursuit of the characters – after mountains, objects, and each other – there is the secondary aspect of the novel’s chasing after them. The critical voice is certainly knowingly acquisitive: “To know is to have,” it declares. “It is already a claim, a species of possession” (202), and listing in detail (like writing, like description), “is an expression of desire: the desire to know, to see arranged, to commit to memory” (203). In referring to its own operations it explicitly describes own drive, admits the end of desire to be such possession, and suggests that we consider the potential of literary operations themselves to apprehend, and to capture, objects in the world.

Though he is never, in the story, referred to by his full name, the inner jacket of *The Volcano Lover* tells us that the Cavaliere is William Hamilton’s “fictional double, on whose behalf I have taken what liberties suited his nature, as I have with the other historical persons given their proper names.” If the ostensible objective facts of William Hamilton’s history are not adhered to in Sontag’s novel, then the question arises of what Sontag means by the term. If the story isn’t “true,” but it’s a “double” of the real, then what parts of Hamilton are rescued and carried over into her characterization of the Cavaliere? If “knowing” is “having,” then how do those characteristics, mediated through language, permit her to posit such a continuity of identity between them?

The immediate effect of exercising a narrator who assertively gestures at the act of narration itself is to create a sense of the text's inviting you to be aware of artifice. The flea market that opens the novel is a landscape of profusion, cluttered with variegated choice, most objects – being secondhand – carrying the resonances of prior stories, past lives. They are attached to histories that are at once inaccessible (because gone) as well as somehow still evident to the viewer who encounters them. The trinkets suggest a parallel to the objects under consideration in a novel based on historical fact, whose author, too, stands at the edge of a mountain of the outmoded. Both the writer and the figure in the flea market figures are defined by their looking backwards, into a mass of historical detritus.

Although she may claim “I am not a thief,” this is still Sontag pointing to herself as possible pilferer. That she registers their neglected status is enough to suggest their being up for grabs. (As Sontag writes on Benjamin and the melancholic temperament, “the nihilistic energies of the modern era make everything a ruin or fragment – and therefore collectible.”<sup>24</sup>) “I’m checking on what’s in the world” may seem a tentative statement, but the knowledge that this “checking” provides the opportunity to collect assures the possibility of an actively possessive relation between speaker and subject matter.

To address in earnest this potentially possessive relation, it matters what kind of object is being acquired. Is the possibility of appropriating history, inherent in the purchase of a neglected flea market trinket, paralleled when Sontag writes about people in places that once were real? If the inquisitive flea-market tourist is to be taken as equivalent to the novel’s author, then to call the contents of that market “what’s in the world” suggests, too, a more concrete reality about the subjects of the novel, for the historical subject matter, too, must then be to some degree “in the

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<sup>24</sup> Susan Sontag, “Under the Sign of Saturn,” in *Under the Sign of Saturn*, (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1980), p. 120.

world.” The statement pushes us to wonder about the status of the novel’s fiction, especially under circumstances where its author proclaims the unreality of her work.

To suggest, even obliquely as here, that the novel’s content might be that which exists “in the world” contradicts the ontological freedom suggested in the novel’s declarative subtitle, “A Romance.” Scholes & Kellogg account for the romance’s lineage to its Greek iterations, “highly stylized” plots and in which “the principal characters... are definitely human beings, but extraordinarily attractive ones, and usually virtuous and honorable despite extraordinary pressures... As a rule in these tales, strict poetic justice prevails, and the truly virtuous characters are indestructible though always threatened with destruction.”<sup>25</sup>

The romance is ecstatically fabricated, a genre of fantasy and symmetry, while the flea-market shopper who runs her hands across *real* objects – familiarizing herself with their textures and weights – is involved, steeped, in the matter of the world. By extending the hand onto the objects that are being looked at, Sontag’s narrator calls up “the relation of image to the real that the conjunction of optic and haptic suggests.”<sup>26</sup> Emphasizing touch is to emphasize certainty, the way that this action promises to “grasp” the object before one.

And yet, although the suggestion of a tactile (and therefore indexical) relation between object and speaker is instated, there is an inverted way in which this voice in *The Volcano Lover* suggests the conventions of the romance. Scholes & Kellogg explain that in the romance “there is no attempt at an illusion of historicity or at a presentation of ordinary contemporary life. These are made-up stories which admit to being made-up stories.” To “admit” to being invented is not a dissimilar gesture from the self-reflexive, auto-disclosing narrator that Sontag deploys. The

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<sup>25</sup> Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 68-9.

<sup>26</sup> Brigitte Peucker, “Looking and Touching: Spectacle and Collection in Sontag’s *Volcano Lover*,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, Volume 11, Issue 1 (Spring 1998), p. 159.

difference in approaches, the increase in notches of complexity, relies on measuring how far the statement of “being made-up” can go when the language of the novel seems indeed to refer to real objects that both existed and continue to exist in the world.

The self-reflexivity of the critical character that occupies portions of its voice, as well as the novel’s highly formalized story divisions, are among many pressing aspects that pull it towards the conscious acknowledgment of literary artifice.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, the elaborate description of objects unrelated to the novel’s central plot, the recurring characters’ psychological consistency – these are aspects that bestow comfort in a way only the ease of realism can, even if the intensity of the emotions relayed fall towards the melodramatic. *The Volcano Lover* is not “historiographic metafiction, obsessed with the question of how we can come to know the past today.”<sup>28</sup> But it grasps at and turns out the mechanisms of historical fiction so as to examine the novel’s capacity to refer.

To place Sontag’s examinations in context, we can refer to Walsh’s helpfully itemized series of contemporary maneuvers by which novelists have attempted to disavow fiction’s capacity to refer.<sup>29</sup> Authors “[detach] the fictive act from the domain of truth”, including via “the institution of a narrator as the source of the fictive discourse, the redescription of fictional

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<sup>27</sup> Sontag spoke about the novel’s orderly, intentional structure in her *Paris Review* interview when she explained that at the beginning of writing *The Volcano Lover* “I had a very strong idea of a structure. I took it from a piece of music, Hindemith’s *The Four Temperaments*... The Hindemith starts with a triple prologue, three very short pieces. Then come four movements – melancholic, sanguinic, phlegmatic, choleric. In that order. I knew I was going to have a triple prologue and then four sections or parts corresponding to the four temperaments – though I saw no reason to belabor the idea by actually labeling [them],” Sontag 1995. Hindemith’s “The Four Temperaments” was composed in 1940 upon commission by the ballet master George Balanchine, and performed for the first time in 1946. Hindemith’s work was rigorously structured; in it, “Formal processes... assume the greatest importance as symbols of a transcendent balance and proportion Hindemith believed to be music’s heritage” (See “Hindemith, Paul,” in *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, s.v., Ian Kemp).

<sup>28</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 46.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Walsh, “The Pragmatics of Narrative Fictionality,” in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, eds. James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p. 151.

artefacts as props in a game of make-believe, the notion of pretended speech acts, and the recuperation of fictional reference as actual reference to fictional worlds.” The complexity (and pleasure) of considering Sontag’s attitude to the referencing capacities, as well as the signifying capacities, of her fiction (and in turn attending to how those two operations are similar and different) rests in the conflict between her structuralist-semiotic leanings (via Barthes and Robbe-Grillet, as well as the anti-hermeneutics elaborated significantly and to great fanfare in her early career) and the devotion by which the reality occupied by Hamilton and his cohort is sketched in the novel.

This act of re-naming links Sontag’s novel to an entire history of poststructuralist argument wherein the relationship between world and text is troubled, for it places *The Volcano Lover* in an ironic relation to the realist mode that “depends heavily on readers’ ability to naturalize it and recognize the common world which serves as point of reference.”<sup>30</sup> It’s this universal “common world” Sontag’s use of pet names refuses, because it forces that one consider the secondary world of codes and mythic figures instated by history and distance from event.

To prevent the reader from identifying the character with the real person whose life serves as the novel’s historical basis by refusing to name him such focalizes the artifice of Sontag’s historical novelization. Hamilton is not Hamilton, Hamilton is “the Cavaliere” – a construction for whom event may, indeed, follow the arc of a once-living figure, but who, within the framework of the novel, of fiction, of the artifice, escapes the artlessness of life and settles easily only into the realm of writerly un-reality.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1975), p. 135.

<sup>31</sup> The verisimilitude principle of the historical novel might be read as a doubling of the imagined referential capacity of language in general. The common, pragmatically-adhered belief that our words clutch the meanings we hope they convey with utter success, is performed and tested by the historical novel’s contentious status relative to the “true story” upon which its based. To write a historical novel – to

His first scene in the novel does not betray anything of his specific position, nor history, nor that he will come to occupy such a central place. Rather, he is introduced to us as “a tall, sharp-faced man of forty-two (he was a tall man for that time)” (4). The prevailing details here are, first, his bodily comportment, and then his place as a notch in history. To say that “he was a tall man for that time” pegs Hamilton in a universe that extends beyond himself. It zooms out, privileging the historical perspective – one to which the subject of the scene – that is, Hamilton – is unaware, and *has no access*. The note emphasizes how the referentiality of such terms is relative to such things as historical context. To be tall “for that time” implies that there are others in which he isn’t, or wouldn’t have been – “tall” acquires its meaning in relation to the standards of the moment, rather than by positive or identification with some universal fact.

The note about the Cavaliere’s height foregrounds the relativity of meaning in the context of shifting historical standards: Sontag shows us how “tall” denoted a different state when located under different circumstances. Similarly, the use of pet names exhibits a discomfiture about the representative quality of writing. The caricature quality of a moniker like “the Hero” (Sontag’s narrator’s name for Lord Nelson) points directly to their place in history, the myths with which they have come to be identified. By refusing to label characters by their “historical” names, Sontag disrupts the referential link that must be maintained in historical narratives and biographies. She does not uphold or require the assumption that language can grip at what was “real.”

The characters are unreal, perhaps – shadows of historical figures Sontag makes little effort to convince us are faithful. Yet the statement that these are purely fictional figures who take those earlier persons’ stories and qualities as “inspiration” also feels inaccurate. In many

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attempt a “faithful” one – is partly to believe in the ability to cohere names in the text with existing historical situations.

ways, *The Volcano Lover* functions as a documentary not of those figures' lives, but of the lives of their histories. While Sontag's narrator might not refer directly to Hamilton when she writes of the Cavaliere, the way that her narrative both echoes and re-enters the mythic narrative of these historical celebrities brings it, once more, closer to the real.

Partly, it is the novel's depiction of the processes of ossifying histories that suggests this possibility. Eleonora de Fonseca Pimentel, the Neapolitan revolutionary who is hanged in the final section of the book, refers to the name as one most simple and obvious way by which history comes to attach importance when she points out that she is referred to sometimes "just as Eleonora... while my colleagues in the Neapolitan revolution of 1799, all men, never are referred to by their first names alone" (416). The process of name-taking and its artifice is made explicit within the plane of the story too, in the self-referential anecdote of the sybil Efrosina Pumo's premonition about William Beckford's arrival in Naples; he is referred to, like the other characters, with a nickname that bears the definite article ("the Knave of Cups"), but we have seen it bestowed upon him (thereby demystifying the process) by a psychic (therefore suggesting how the premonitory becomes a part of what's known about you and, in its own way, also true).

This demonstration of the way that histories come to be carried forward as legitimate takes place largely has to do with the way that the novel seems less an attempt to relay a faithful account of the characters' "real lives," but rather an approach towards the actual histories that – faithful or not – have come to exist. In terms of the Cavaliere's Hamilton, or the Fair One's Emma, Sontag's novel refers to the "truth" of their existences as an idea.

*The Volcano Lover* is not a historical novel written in the style of those that work, like semifictionalized biographies, towards conveying a "signified" that matches the tale strung from known facts. Not only does it forcefully acknowledge the role of its teller, and the cultivated

mediation – not unlike the selective, idiosyncratic collecting that the Cavaliere undertakes – Sontag also departs from the facts, and in that sense quite simply rejects the biographical historical novel’s mandate. Though many of the changes Sontag has made lie in the realm of “artistic license” acceptable for historical novels, her injection of Baron von Scarpia, a character from Puccini’s *Tosca*, is entirely a sweep away from any admission to referential certitude.<sup>32</sup>

Or perhaps the answer is this: that Sontag does not attempt any certain reference to the lives of the people upon whom her own characters are based. But the novel does examine “real” objects in the world. Read against the other characters in the novel, the Baron von Scarpia seems to be the only one not “based” on a historical personage. And yet he is “real,” insofar as he is from a “real” work of drama – and is, therefore, a detailed reference to an object, idea, or textual construction that exists outside of the narrative. It’s a fiction in the Godardian manner, in which are mixed “professional actors with historical people... the documentary with the iconographic.”<sup>33</sup>

Through the novel’s free indirect discourse, the characters (especially the Cavaliere) are presented to us as houses of “interiority,” feeling, want, contradictory intention and desire – they are psychologically continuous, in the style of the realist mode – and yet, at the same time, they are also inevitably signifiers, whose place has much longer been in the emphatic history of the British empire than in their own lives. This is a true recasting of a set of false stories, a

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<sup>32</sup> Sontag’s *Paris Review* interview has her stating that “I had to borrow a stage villain, Scarpia, to have one character in *The Volcano Lover* I didn’t love.” Perhaps one loves one’s own characters in a different, more complete way, having needed to chisel their minds. One may judge them for their shortcomings (as Sontag does, when she gives Eleonora de Fonseca Pimentel the last lines of the novel), but one still loves them. Perhaps it is a unique empathy that emerges from needing to know everything about something. Total understanding as love.

<sup>33</sup> Wollen, *Signs and Meaning*, p. 154.



documentary of “Four future citizens of the universe of history painting” (207). The novel’s use of the “aureole” as a phenomenon surrounding its star cast suggests this view.

While being nursed back to health by Emma and Emma’s mother at the Cavaliere’s home in Naples, there is a party in the hero’s honor:

“The Cavaliere stood beside the column and made a short speech of welcome comparing him to Alexander the Great, the close of which the Cavaliere’s wife interrupted, crying that there should be a statue of him made of pure gold and placed in the middle of London, and would be if those at home understood how much they owed him – he felt quite aureoled.”

“Aureoled” is the key phrase here. Though in one sense the text doubtless means for us to understand the Hero as feeling like he is covered by a glow.<sup>34</sup> And yet, it must also intend for us to perceive the literal meaning, indicating the halo of light which often might surround figures in paintings. Though the Hero may not himself go so far as to be projecting a knowledge of his future standing in history, it does imply to the reader a description of the impulse and process that is carried forth the novel’s narrative voice. Constant reference to these characters as they will be treated in the narrative of history is equivalent to relentlessly reminding us of their own “framing,” their historical haloes.

The Cavaliere also points out the process in Part III, when he laments that

“One applies oneself diligently, one’s achievements mount, genuine achievements, and then, alas, a story becomes attached to one’s name, everyone hears it, everyone tells it, and that is all finally which anyone recalls.” (371)

On the other hand, the phrase also stands counter to the effects of this process because it points to the aureole’s *accretion*. Thus, what Sontag accomplishes throughout the novel is a simultaneous “aureoling” of its characters as well as an excavation of the processes by which a figure comes to acquire their *aureole*, to use her terminology.

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<sup>34</sup> The reader is primed to see light: earlier in the novel, in a sketch of the day, Sontag writes, “The aureoled September sun was brightening” (14).

Aureoles might be understood as the amorphous legend that comes to encrust figures in history; the sort of framing that means these figures are handed down as tokens, a type of posterity that undercuts their lives and the accompanying vital, complex intricacies. Yet an aureole is also not just a halo bestowed by history – Sontag’s use of the term focuses the visual nature of the retrospective imaginary. It connects to the importance of paintings and visual acts in the process of bestowing figures places in history, an aspect that Sontag’s focus on the paintings of Emma by famous artists – artists whose work can be found in, among other places, the collection of the British Museum still now – foregrounds.

The novelist John Banville complains in his initial review of *The Volcano Lover*, published in the *New York Times*, that the novel is too much a “studied fiction,” in which there is “a passionate moral intelligence hard at work.”<sup>35</sup> He then capitulates to what he sees as an alternative: “But then perhaps she did not set out to write a work of pure fictional art,” locating the novel “in that broad but nebulous area between fiction and essay.” Surely this sense of its nonfiction (the underlying term implied by Banville’s use of the phrase “essay”) quality is due in part to Sontag’s omnivorous strategy of including not just characters “drawn from life” but also to Sontag’s pulling out parts of their letters, writing about actual works of literature, calling up renowned objects like the Portland Vase, and including real paintings – especially those of Emma.

And indeed, to engage with the pictures of Emma is to engage with the history of her image, which is “true” in a sense quite unlike the story of her romance with Nelson. How can this be so? Richard Dyer’s *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* provides a useful gloss on the reification of the star image. Though the great works by Emma all involve her keeping still,

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<sup>35</sup> John Banville, “By Lava Possessed,” *The New York Times Book Review*. August 9, 1992, <http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/03/12/specials/sontag-volcano.html>. (accessed October 12th, 2016.)

the way that her image has proliferated to generate a kind of second-degree reality – a myth of Emma that is both true and untrue – parallels that of the female celebrities discussed in Dyer’s book. The visual history incited by Emma’s reproduction in likeness inspires the same questions that Dyer has to ask about the celebrity complex that turns “one flesh and blood person” into a star: “Is it possible to have any sense of Valentino or Monroe, their persons, apart from all the things they have been made to mean?”<sup>36</sup> The answer would seem to be: it is no more or less possible than to write about them in novels.

As Walsh explains, “Fiction is usually understood to have a second-order relation to the real world, via the mimetic logic of fictional representation: it represents events, or imitates discourses, that we assimilate through nonfictional modes of narrative understanding.”<sup>37</sup> But Sontag’s fiction, in its nearly documentarian impulse towards the myths and histories in which her characters are encrusted, manages both this “second-order relation” and a first-order applicability. While the figures drawn from Hamilton and Emma and Nelson are, in her novel, merely “drawn,” not biographical, the narrative’s engagement with historical addition, the way it engages with and reveals how these figures have been shepherded through history, give it an applicability to the “true” that contests the one-sided adherence to the invented implied by a term like Walsh’s “second-order relation.”

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<sup>36</sup> Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 9, p. 14.

<sup>37</sup> Walsh, “The Pragmatics of Narrative Fictionality,” p. 150.

### *Three*

#### *Requisite Distances*

“The melancholic sees the world itself become a thing: refuge, solace, enchantment.”<sup>38</sup>

In *Eros the Bittersweet*, the poet, literary critic, and classical scholar Anne Carson, uses a variety of references but relies mostly on a selection of Sappho’s fragments to track a history of “desire” in Western thought. Her critical framework incorporates Sappho, Aristophanes, Simone Weil, Sartre, and Lacan, as well as examples from literary history (Tolstoy and Stendahl, for example) to generate her account.

The reading she undertakes progresses from a markedly psychoanalytically-influenced perspective that opens up the imagination of “desire” in the classical work as being defined by the necessities of deferral and evasion. Her position – distinctly Lacanian – is that eros, in the imagination of Sappho and her contemporaries, is fundamentally engendered and only possible because of a distance, an interval. This absence is so overdetermining that it even manifests etymologically: “The Greek word *eros* denotes ‘want,’ ‘lack,’ ‘desire for that which is missing.’ The lover wants what he does not have. It is by definition impossible for him to have what he wants if, as soon as it is had, it is no longer wanting.”<sup>39</sup> Carson proposes that desire is not only structured around the inability to acquire the object of one’s fixation, but that anything constituting acquisition would evacuate the desirability; she privileges the momentum of desire over the possibility of its satisfaction.

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<sup>38</sup> Sontag, “Under the Sign of Saturn” p. 125.

<sup>39</sup> Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 10.

With a mind towards absence and surfeit, *The Volcano Lover* also consistently enlists metaphors of hunger and repletion to chisel its descriptions of desire, phrasing that emphasizes the sense's ambiguous embodiment, and the dynamism (that is, uncertainty; inconstancy) by which both states are characterized. For instance, in one early scene, when the Cavaliere is traveling out of London with Catherine, and starts to feel his mind glaze over, he is described as not knowing "what to do with his *hungry* eyes" (17; emphasis mine).

The French philosopher Simone Weil, whose work Sontag reviewed for the New York Review of Books in 1963 in an essay later collected in *Against Interpretation*, wrote, "We imagine kinds of food, but the hunger itself is real; we have to fasten onto the Hunger."<sup>40</sup> Weil's statement suggests an unconventional principle – that which we imagine to serve as resolution to hunger is less worth consideration than the hunger itself. The object that lies at the end of the reach is imagined – and the only truly extant aspect is the presence of one's wanting. But in order to edge towards the object (all one can undertake, in Weil's program), hunger must be leveraged, deployed.

In the third of the suspended vignettes that, montaged together, open the novel, the Vesuvius is introduced not as landmass but as hunger. Instead of picking up on an obvious physical detail, describing the notches on its body, the smells that it emits, what we are immediately told is, "It's the mouth of a volcano. Yes, mouth; and lava tongue" (5).

"Mouth" ascribes the human imperatives to eat, lick, kiss – to incorporate, to consume – to the non-living. The critical narrator, instead of simply using "mouth" as an evocative description of the mountain and moving on, refuses to rest. Instead, it pursues the metaphor,

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<sup>40</sup> Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (New York: Octagon Books, 1952), p. 68.

extending it so as to test and pry at it the way a poet might test the scope of an idea, once it seizes her:

“A body, a monstrous living body, both male and female. It emits, ejects. It is also an interior, an abyss. Something alive, that can die. Something inert that becomes agitated, now and then.” (5-6)

And so, the volcano becomes more than a geologic formation. By exploding the implications of “mouth,” the term deployed in even the most prosaic parlance, Sontag reveals the metaphor capacity of language as the first, most basic agent of transformation. The passage exhibits the process by which associative relationships, embedded in words, arm the latter with the ability to manipulate.

That the use of “mouth” brings with it the resonance and signifying capacities of a hungering body may not be acknowledged by its great admirer, the Cavaliere, instates a tension between what the voice implies and what the figure observes. It may be that the Cavaliere loves, or is attracted to, the mountain in part because it suggests insatiability – but that this resonance is not a component of his self-reported magnetism dramatizes an inconsistent interior; mechanisms of want and of subsequent displacement, or diversion. The narrator acts as an interpretive apparatus; where usually the reader is tasked with the hermeneutic, here, it is the voice relaying the story that provides its own account of what things “represent.” It is as though we see both the Cavaliere’s perspective, and his psychoanalyst’s.

In *The Volcano Lover*, hunger-as-acquisition is manifested on the plane of language and the use of metaphor. Hunger as a metaphor for desire, yes, but also desire as metaphorically massaged, partially satisfied, by the ascription of metaphoric terms. The idea that a desired thing can be “got at” by metaphor is oddly satisfying – it leaves room to tease. Even while inching the one who interacts with the metaphor closer to the object at hand, the tactic also distances by

placing in the foreground an entirely different denotation. The substitution of one thing for another at once solves and thwarts desire.

Following Carson, we see in *The Volcano Lover* that to have one's hunger "solved," desire sated, is to necessarily undo the drive that hunger instigates. The Cavaliere's marriage with Catherine is "wholly successful," leading him to no longer hold that much interest in her – "There was no frustration, at least on his part, therefore no longing, no desire to be together as much as possible" (23). Sontag shows the sustained maintenance of desire in a way that resonates with Carson's thinking: in both, the desire is always a triangular arrangement, constituted by two elements and an interval – a distance – between them. What is the ideal condition? Homeostasis: to be both satisfied and tantalized, to be given no total confirmation in one direction or another. The meaningful experience with the volcano: "He was seeing something he had always imagined. Always wanted to know" (26). Yet the place where he still feels driven is where "One never could know enough, see enough. Much longing there."

Why this longing? What does it serve? If the journey towards fulfilment is most gratifying when it takes place on a plane where satisfaction could never take place, why should that be so important? "Because there is always more... You must have it because it is one step toward a completing of your collection. But this ideal completing for which every collector hungers is a delusive goal" (72). Ultimately, this "more" to which one "steps" towards is preferable when boundless. For, the voice explains to us, if a collection is indeed completed, "if you could be sure that you had every last item, the satisfaction of having it all would eventually, inevitably, decay. A complete collection is a dead collection. It has no posterity."

By "posterity," the narrator means an ability to drag the amorous subject, the collector, into the future: once you have acquired everything belonging in the category of that which you

love, there is no longer anything to pull your imagination forward – all you have is the work left behind you, and there is no lead in sight. (This lack of any prospective imagination that is affected upon death can, in the Cavaliere’s experience, be compared only to the feeling he had after Catherine’s passes away: “Thinking about the future, the Cavaliere is peering into his own nonexistence,” 114). Desire becomes a way of pulling oneself into the future.

However, this capacity to tease one forward does not necessarily have to rest in its providing the ability to imagine a later time. Desire is even somewhat moody, a consequence of chance: “This could be anywhere, though it happens to be here. It will be full of everywhere. But I would be entering it here” (4). Something of the existential recognition of that notion that you simply could have been born someone else, lived an entirely different life, animates the passage; it recalls how that which most structures and determines our trajectories is often the most accidental, the least certain.

The best example of the volatile, idiosyncratic nature of desire is in the Cavaliere’s obsessive attitude towards the volcano. Perhaps it is partly because the volcano is so broadly receptive to being invested with meaning that it holds such allure: “You project onto the volcano the amount of rage, of complicity with destructiveness, of anxiety about your ability to feel already in your head” (82). The volcano’s work in the novel – utter flexibility, a persistent skewing-away from fixable meaning – recalls the same formative indeterminacy discussed by Lacan in Seminar II, which incorporates his less-formal 1955 seminar work on Poe’s “Purloined Letter.”<sup>41</sup> Poe’s story dramatizes a sequence of events that unfold without knowledge of the contents of a significant letter and which rather depend, upon the second-degree estimations and actions chosen in accordance with personal disposition. “The behavior of those who seek it

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<sup>41</sup> Vincent B. Leitch, ed., *The Norton Anthology of Literary Theory & Criticism* (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010), p. 1159



creates a story around their presumptions about the contents, whether or not the letter is ever opened.”<sup>42</sup> Lacan writes that the characters’ “displacement is determined by the place which a pure signifier – the purloined letter – comes to occupy” (quoted in Norton 1159), a process termed “symbolic determination.”

The Vesuvius functions within *The Volcano Lover* as a symbolic determiner in the sense that Lacan designates, insofar as it structures major movements within the novel at the same time as it cannot – in a tenably logical manner – be “interpreted.” In refusing to commit to attaching or investing the Vesuvius with a single meaning, but rather embracing its multivalent nature, the novel it dramatizes the situation where the actors’ drive is motivated by an indeterminate objective – a trajectory at once defined by this objective, while simultaneously rendering it irrelevant. Dropping an emptiness – an unspeaking space – into the center of her narrative, Sontag makes *The Volcano Lover* into an expression of this contradiction between vacuity and pursuit.

Yet, at the same time, making the volcano the central gravitational force of the novel also turns it into possessing the vocation of wanting to eat everything, to say everything, to become the ultimate all-speaking voice – for by making it possible to invest the volcano with a boundless array of significances, Sontag also makes the language used to describe it a language of ultimate expressiveness. In its grandness and receptivity to being projected upon, it provides a landscape where the highly individualized nature of desires can be dramatized. The force that seems to churn Sontag’s narrative seems to be more inflected with preference rather than any requirement: “Need? Ah, no. None of this do I need” (3).

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<sup>42</sup> p. 1159

The difference between a desire and a motive – if we commence under the assumption that there indeed exist two such discrete qualities – might best be located in different magnitudes of this needfulness. More often, motives are caused by the inescapable realities of physical being – to eat, drink, sleep, rest. Motives are inevitable, necessary, common. A summative sentence on the philosophy of motive might read, “Man is condemned to eat.”

Desire, though no less an unchosen condition, is rarely as obvious, nor are its impetuses as universal. It is instanced by an individual predilection and exists as expression of the idiosyncrasy of an individual psychology. Unlike the drive for satiety that motivates a character to eat, the force that makes the Cavaliere fall in love with the Vesuvius is so distinctive so as to be almost unique. As when Barthes asks in *A Lover's Discourse*:

“Is it the whole of So-and-so I desire (a silhouette, a shape, a mood)? And, in that case, what is it in this loved body which has the vocation of a fetish for me? What perhaps incredibly tenuous portion – what accident?”<sup>43</sup>

There is something inexplicable, something idiosyncratic and – often – deeply perverse about desire. This can be seen in the incessant recourse of Freudian psychoanalysis to Oedipal structures, and its related relegation of all factors to childhood neuroses to instances of the child being unable to reach sexual gratification, which leads to the instatement of deep-seated, sustained self-loathing – it is a model that consistently places impulses conventionally perceived as deviant at the core of developed adult sexuality.<sup>44</sup>

This conception of desire's propensity for the perverse is a conception partly determined by elements of the romantic cult of the artist – Sontag writes about this hinge in “The Pornographic Imagination,” claiming that, of art which captures the sexually transgressive or

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<sup>43</sup> Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), p. 20.

<sup>44</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1955)

uncomfortable, “What makes a work of pornography part of the history of art rather than of trash is not distance, the superimposition of a consciousness more conformable to that of ordinary reality upon the ‘deranged consciousness’ of the erotically obsessed. Rather, it is the originality, thoroughness, authenticity, and power of that deranged consciousness itself, as incarnated in the work.”<sup>45</sup> In her defense of sexually transgressive materials *as art*, Sontag generates criteria for the latter akin to one that relies on total seriousness of pursuit – a kind of frenzied dedication.

In Sontag’s discussion of *The Story of O* in the same essay, she defends the novel’s literary status by arguing that it “remains firmly anchored to certain notions of the *formal* consummation of intense feeling, of procedures for exhausting an experience, that connect as much with literature and recent literary history as with the ahistorical domain of eros” (Sontag 332). Suggestions of “*formal* consummation,” “exhaustion” – that is to say, of finished-ness – manifest a fantasy of unity between desirer and sought object that seems antithetical to the account of desire that the dominant theoretical discourse of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century provides. Rather, this “formal consummation” seems like an optimistic recasting of the ever-thwarted will to transcription that *The Volcano Lover* dramatizes. The styles of aesthetic relation that permit this “formal consummation” to take place are examined in more depth in the following fragment.

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<sup>45</sup> Susan Sontag, “The Pornographic Imagination,” in *Essays of the 1960s & 70s* (New York: Library of America, 2013), p. 330.

*Four*

*Pygmalion in Reverse*

Meanwhile he carved his snow-white ivory  
With marvelous triumphant artistry  
And gave it perfect shape, more beautiful  
Than ever woman born.  
– Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Book X<sup>46</sup>

In the version of the Pygmalion myth Sontag has the Cavaliere read so that she may integrate it into the narrative, the story is of a man who finds a statue in a garden, and “wants her to become conscious, and, holding the rather simple theory that all knowledge comes from the senses, decides to open her sensorium” (45). He grants one sense: smell, the “most primitive,” and from this erupts an ecstatic, profuse, lengthy description of the world that is, now, suddenly available to her:

“She smells the sycamores and poplar trees, resinous, acrid, she can smell the tiny shit of worms, she smells the polish on soldiers’ boots, and roasted chestnuts, and bacon burning, she can smell the wisteria and heliotrope and lemon trees, she can smell the rank odor of deer and wild boar fleeing the royal hounds and the three thousand beaters in the King’s employ, the effusions of a couple copulating in the nearby bushes, the sweet smell of the freshly cut lawn, the smoke from the chimneys of the palace, from far away the fat King on the privy, she can even smell the rain-lashed erosion of the marble of which she is made, the odor of death (though she knows nothing of death).” (46)

The statue, the Galatea figure, in Sontag’s version of the tale is slowly changed by her new capacity to sense: “time is born, because one smell succeeds, dominates another” (47). There is much to be felt, and felt in order, entering and leaving from her sensory domain. This disappearance is cast as a slipping from her grip, one she wishes she could remedy:

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<sup>46</sup> Ovid, A.D. Melville, trans., *Metamorphoses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 232.

“But odors do vanish sometimes (indeed, some were gone so quickly!), though some return. And when an odor fades, she feels – is – diminished. She begins to dream, this consciousness-that-smells, of how she could retain the odors, by storing them up inside herself, so she would never lose them... Every pleasure – and smelling, whatever she smells, is pure pleasure – becomes an experience of anticipated loss. She wants, if only she knew how, to become a collector.” (47)

*The Volcano Lover* is filled with this sort of wanting. Its cast is a cast of emissaries of desire. The most pronounced of these is the Cavaliere, who has the biggest hunger. “Biggest,” both because that which he lusts for most prominently – the Vesuvius – is of venerable size, but also because he, more so than any other lusting subject considered in the narrative, is after that which is eminently unacquirable. How to measure a yearning whose object – like a volcano, like a girl – exceeds every imaginable limit? *The Volcano Lover* explores the frameworks of desire and acquisition, making its subject the dynamism ignited by the reach for the wanted object.

This reach in attempt to satisfy is couched by the novel’s critical narrator as partly assisted by the ability to apprehend mentally. “One does not actually have to own the things,” are told. “To know is to have... It is already a claim, a species of possession, to think about them in this form, the form of a list: which is to value them, to rank them, to say they are worth remembering or desiring” (202). Yet though the ability to make such announcements about value and relevance is here posited as a “species of possession,” it remains only that – a type. Simply to “inventory” does not suffice. The various instances of “having” attempted in the novel remain tenuous, and, as discussed above, Sontag’s own language instigates a complex relationship with the objects it might seem to “possess.” Like the Cavaliere’s own attempts to seal down the things he wants, the act of acquisition always contains within it suggestion of that which escapes the process of capture.

The Cavaliere's intense attraction to the Vesuvius and to Emma are the novel's central ground for understanding these fixations. Almost immediately upon the young woman's arrival in Naples, Emma's begins to be presented as somehow immune to representation:

*"Impossible to describe..."*

It is impossible to describe her beauty, said the Cavaliere; impossible to describe how happy she makes me.

It is impossible to describe how much I miss you, Charles, wrote the girl. Impossible to describe how angry I am." (129)

The central principle here is that there is a category which might be termed the ineffable.<sup>47</sup> And, if unable to be articulated, then also unable to be captured, possessed. That which offers a total resistance to being conveyed suggests both the amorphousness of affect and the inadequacy of the language we have been given to approach it. Against what is perhaps the conventional reaction, Sontag does not imagine this imperfectability as worthy of lament. The syntax of the Cavaliere's sentence, for instance, suggests that there may be some parallel between the ungraspable magnitude of Emma's beauty and his surfeit of happiness. Likewise in an earlier scene prior to her arrival, he "dotes" on the objects of his collection beneath a golden motto that reads "My homeland is where I feel well," and records of his objects that "Their forms... were simple, beautiful, and *varied beyond description*" (73; emphasis mine).

Sontag stages the way that motivations driven by desires, and which involve language as a means of satisfying them, are thwarted by the latter's incapacity. She sutures representation to want as a means by which one might attempt to "acquire," yet foregrounds the defiance that endeared objects exhibit in the face of these attempts. The Cavaliere's joy, how stimulated he is by Emma's beauty, Emma's pain at being torn from her beloved, as well as her indignation – all

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<sup>47</sup> An improved version of the same unspeakable profusion – also based on a clamoring of the senses – that's referred to in earlier descriptions of the King's grotesque bodily functions, which he forces upon the Cavaliere: "How can the Cavaliere communicate to an auditor *how* disgusting the King is. Impossible to describe" (44).

of these affects recall in their broadness and inability to be captured Roland Barthes' explication of the use of the phrase "adorable" by the "amorous subject" – that is, the lover – in *A Lover's*

*Discourse*:

"By a singular logic, the amorous subject perceives the other as a Whole... and, at the same time, this Whole seems to him to involve a remainder, which he cannot express. It is this other *as a whole* who produces in him an aesthetic vision: he praises the other for being perfect... he imagines that the other wants to be loved, as he himself would want to be loved, not for one or another of his qualities, but for *everything*, and this *everything* he bestows upon the other in the form of a blank word, for the Whole cannot be inventoried without being diminished: in *Adorable!* there is no residual quality, but only the *everything* of affect."<sup>48</sup>

The cause of her characters' inability to speak in the face of that which they love seems much a consequence that emerges upon their encountering this "*everything* of affect" of which Barthes writes. In *The Volcano Lover*, it is largely aesthetic strategies – strategies of representation – which compose the Cavaliere's attempts to resolve the issue of what Barthes calls "the remainder." Early in her time at Naples, Emma writes to Charles of the Cavaliere's affection for her, relaying, "He tells me I am a grate work of art & I am sorry to see that he loves me" (128). There is both a gap and a hinge between the categories of the amorous/erotic and the aesthetic. From this arise questions concerning whether the Cavaliere loves her because of her recalling art that he loves: that is, are we to read the clauses in Emma's statement as causal, rather than simply conjoined? Or are we to understand that it is because he loves her, and that he can only love in his *style*, that he projects upon her the status of the "aesthetic"?

The Cavaliere's attraction to Emma at the beginning of the narrative is described more as physically-derived than belonging to the elevated, emotional sort. At this stage, his look towards her is almost purely lustful. When the Cavaliere needs to be *convinced* to take Emma in, the

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<sup>48</sup> Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, p. 19

fulcrum that shifts his amenability is not shown as goodwill but rather something more like need. His resistance is only dissolved when he capitulated to the inevitable body: “the groin ached. Fantasy could not be denied. The inner fire was not entirely damped” (124). That Sontag meant to ensure we read his agreement to host Emma as principally a consequence of lust is also emphasized by the fact that here the story diverges from the recorded history of Emma Lyon’s transfer. We see in letters exchanged between William Hamilton and Charles Greville prior to Emma’s arrival in Naples in 1786, Hamilton possessed of a different attitude, emphasizing to his nephew that Lyon’s “stay with him would not be permanent and that the final responsibility for her lay with Greville.”<sup>49</sup>

The first encounters between Emma and the Cavaliere all emphasize the sensuous, and underscore the decidedly physical effect of looking at her. As noted, it is the “groin ache” that finally summons up the Cavaliere’s willingness to host her. Yet where that “ache” seems almost entirely an implication of flat lustfulness, what Emma comes to inspire is broader, more evasive, than obvious sexual hunger. The affect she engenders rests more along the lines of simply reminding one of the physical condition. Upon her arrival at Naples, the Cavaliere “experienced a physical shock, as if his heart had plummeted into his belly. He hadn’t remembered that she was that beautiful. Stupendously beautiful” (125). This attention is neither lust nor the kind of disinterested admiration of form or narrative that characterizes a “high” relation to the sensuous world. It is, rather, being forced to sink into the flesh that hugs the bones.

Remarks by Sontag published in the *New York Times Magazine* on the occasion of the centennial anniversary of cinema in 1996 declare that “Cinema began in wonder, the wonder that reality can be transcribed with such immediacy. All of cinema is an attempt to perpetuate and

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<sup>49</sup> Constantine, *Fields of Fire*, p. 144.



reinvent that sense of wonder.”<sup>50</sup> The “wonder” being described here is something akin to the embodied, the fleshly, material – what Benjamin’s “Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936) defines in opposition to what happens when objects are reproduced by cameras: that which has an irreducible, unique “aura.” (It’s perhaps the irreducibility of this aura that inspires the kind of limit to language that Barthes describes in his fragment on “Adorable!”). For all the scorn that may ultimately rest in our ambivalent judgment of the Cavaliere, the way that he directs his love-or-lust into attempts to capture her speaks to a near-universal end of amorousness. His actions are simply one extreme manifestation of the wish to transcribe the beloved, a way of keeping the adored object present, complete, and available.

The immediate impulse by which one is arrested when encountering Emma’s appearance seems to be that of transcription: “Mr. Romney told me that I was a genius, a divinity, that I had only to pose and the painting was done; the rest was mere transcription” (406-7). The paintings that are undertaken are made in the same spirit as the works of cinema that try to capture her “immediacy.” Wondering what it is about Emma that incites such passion is difficult, for it seems both to inhere in and to defy her bodily form: “There was, then, nothing special about her, apart from her physical charms. But there was” (122). Not being able to locate whatever “there was” that made her so particular, the Cavaliere could only undertake to localize value on her physical presence – and, consequently, “transcription” becomes the significant category for attempts to capture her. The pleasure the Cavaliere derives from direct physical contact with Emma is not a greatly elaborated concern. Rather, it’s the visual – the *surface* – that is focused on as the central aspect of her attractiveness, and attempts to duplicate, fix, represent this surface. Just as Charles’ cousin, William Beckford, undertakes his grand tour with an on-staff artist

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<sup>50</sup> Susan Sontag, “The Decay of Cinema,” the *New York Times Magazine*. February 26, 1996, <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/02/25/magazine/the-decay-of-cinema.html>. (accessed March 14, 2017.)

whose work is to “draw views that he wished to commit to memory” (92), the Cavaliere sustains the practice of enlisting artists to capture, first, the Vesuvius, and then her.

Even from the earliest moments of its presence, Emma’s body – her physical anchor – is reread and transmuted in the context of the history of its representations. The Cavalier habitually compares the world he lives in with what he has learned to expect from images. His style of looking is one that exalts in seeing the landscape made malleable to the ideals conveyed in the principally aesthetic. When he looks at Emma, the Cavaliere sees not flesh but rather the associations and, in particular, narratives implied by the codification of the woman’s body created and sustained in the canon of western visual art. The voice, when it describes her to us for the first time, is filtered through this sensibility, highlighting the moments when she could truly be a projection out of this realm of high art: “She was tall and full-figured and her head, with its auburn hair, blue eyes, and ripe mouth, would rival the beauty of certain classical statues, though the Cavaliere, if her chin were not so small” (122).

The continuity between Emma and the world of his favored objects is further cemented by the descriptions of her as embodying the image on the Portland Vase. Initially, the vase, which gave him the sense of “the bite of passion” (120) – a jolt of feeling, pleasure, not unlike the “shock” of the “plummet” he felt at Emma’s appearance in Naples – bears a picture that feels wonderful without compare: “Nothing could be lovelier than the Thetis depicted on the frieze, reclining languidly on the nuptial couch” (121). Yet although it seems “nothing could be lovelier,” Emma arrives and supplants the Vase’s depiction by demonstrating its spirit in flesh: “Hers was the beauty he had adored on canvas, as a statue, on the side of a vase. She the Venus with the arrows, she the reclining Thetis awaiting her bridegroom” (130).

Thus, Emma's first great achievement in the Cavaliere's world is to vitalize the work he loves: she is a vector by which the adored aesthetic objects can become "real." As Emma herself notes in her closing monologue, "My husband thought I was all his vases and statues, all the beauty he admired, come to life" (407). Perhaps, she is his ersatz cinema, somehow accomplishing the same end of total sensuous "immediacy" that is provided with the invention of the movie camera.

The attempts to "capture" Emma's total constitution are accompanied by moves by the Cavaliere towards transforming her – to change her, better her. When she first arrives, Charles tells the Cavaliere that "You may make of her what you like... The material, I can guarantee, is good" (126). And indeed, like the sculptor in the Pygmalion myth he reads, "he has a didactic streak and wants to see her bloom to the best of his ability" (45). Much of what the Cavaliere conceives as "betterment" is derived from his class position – Charles tells him, before the trade is cemented, that, "I've taught her to read and write and now she reads whole books of the self-improving sort, she's very fond of reading, and remembers everything she's read" (122-23). Later, once she has arrived, the Cavaliere continues to dispense lessons to Emma. At this point, "She was, he thought, taking his impress as clay does a sculptor's thumb" (163).

Perhaps those admonitions are par for the course at the time, in the case of a working-class woman being absorbed into the realm of the court. Though, out of these requests, the most fascinating and disturbing made of Emma is, in fact, not one made of her in her daily life, but rather one made of her as a model, and it is the request is to *be still*. One of the characteristic talents that allows her to perform attitudes is that she is able to change rapidly from one pose into the next: "She would hold the post just long enough for it to be read, then cover herself again. Then she threw off the long shawl to reveal another figure... One pose followed another, at least

ten or twelve, almost without a break” (145). However, the flashing difference between her attitudes, the liminal time in which she adheres not to a role but is instead herself, is not a main concern. Rather, the instruction comes for her to “Illustrate the passion. But don’t move. Don’t... move. This is not a dance... Illustrate the passion. But as a statue” (146).

The way that assertions and requests concerning her aesthetic life shade back into the Cavaliere’s expectations of her are physical, embodied examples of how metaphor is enacted against its subjects. The Pygmalion myth, where a man falls in love with a statue and proceeds to give her life, serves as a grim reverse analogue: “People told the poet that the Cavaliere had acquired, then fallen in love with, a young woman who was beautiful enough to be a Greek statue... and had become a kind of Pygmalion in reverse, turning his Fair One into a statue; more accurately, a Pygmalion in reverse, for he could change her into a statue and then back into a woman at will” (144). When the statue in Sontag’s earlier version of the myth stays still, “Nothing so far can be inferred about [her] inner aliveness” (45). If the Pygmalion story is about bestowing the statue with awareness, with vitality, then the Cavaliere’s attitude towards his edition of Galatea is one that denies life.

The trouble is that the request for stillness made of Emma’s characters extends over Emma herself. Emma is not only a Galatea figure insofar as she is “improved” by the Cavaliere’s lessons, but she is also, like the Galatea in Sontag’s own rendition, purposefully restricted from experience; in the same way that the Cavaliere prefers the unmoving “statue,” he also refuses to imagine Emma as located in time. When he becomes a Knight of Bath, he “[dares] to regard [it] as but the first step up a ladder of titles to be won through his own accomplishments” (13); where he sees his own merits as entitling him to a higher social station – a trajectory, a progression – he

also thinks that women are only meant to serve one end, that “Women like her were supposed to climb as far as they could and be used up, quickly” (122).

Similarly, Emma is *literally* made to pretend to be outside of duration when she has to hide her pregnancy, before she gives birth to her daughter (conceived with Admiral Nelson, the Hero). Certainly this is in part due to the illicit nature of their romance in the first place, but it also carries the extra consequence of satisfying the Cavaliere’s preference that she remains static and unmoving rather than actual, a sentiment that is apotheosized in the Cavaliere’s thought that “Her talent for enjoyment, her lack of fastidiousness, her superb health, delighted him. He was done forever with putting up with a woman’s frailty, a woman’s complaints” (135). What he *values* is that she has none of the “inconveniences” of being a female body – that she is, ultimately, more like a picture.

Despite his intense, idiosyncratic predilections, the Cavaliere is, as a male character, almost depressingly prosaic in this respect: he prefers Emma when she is evacuated of personality. During her first days in Naples, the Cavaliere internally remarks that “While her speech was vulgar and her laugh too hearty, when she was silent she seemed transformed. The Cavaliere saw her watching, observing, her eyes humid with attentiveness” (123). He is partly objecting to the affectations of hers that serve as certain class markers, of course, but the emphasis on her “observing” suggests that he prefers moments she is quietly rapt, agreeing to look at and incorporate his world. The wetness of “humid” attention, in particular, emphasizes the physical aspect of her look – it suggests that she has her body pressed right up against the scenery, and is prepared for it to enter, that her pure attention will let her swallow the world whole.

“Whatever I did not do well, I had not tried to do well – sometimes because I had understood that a higher attainment would have obliged me to alter my character and contain its overflow.” (406)

*The Volcano Lover* is not the first version of the Nelson-Hamilton-Emma Lyon triangle to privilege the historically elided “woman’s point of view.” In 1941, Hollywood director Alexander Korda made *That Hamilton Woman*<sup>51</sup>, a melodrama starring Vivien Leigh as the titular Hamilton wife. While everything in Naples is still luxuriously stable, Korda flaunts the qualities of Emma’s that Sontag, too, seems to most admire. His Emma is charming, vibrant, animated: heartbroken at the revelation that Charles has left her with Hamilton absolutely, she puts herself back together, picking up the parts of herself along with Italian, French, and an upper-class affect.

Actresses like Leigh are all nerve, every fleeting inward thought betrayed by surface. Her expressiveness is perfect for the decided symbolism that characterizes the type of Hollywood movie made by Korda. Films like these are ecstatic unities, where internal narrativizing projects onto the plane of the physical. The way that shadows fall on actors’ faces, how perfectly the shading parallels the scene’s emotional clip; how the sailors’ falling bodies, struck in violence, drop them each into a prayer-like pose – in these worlds, everything visual is plot made manifest.

The continuity between surface and meaning enacted in *That Hamilton Woman* recalls

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<sup>51</sup> *That Hamilton Woman*, directed by Alexander Korda, starring Vivien Leigh (1941; Los Angeles: United Artists), videostream.

the way that Emma and, to an extent, the Cavaliere's first wife, Catherine, use their bodies as the canvases from which aesthetic totalities might be projected. As Emma said of herself, "I could represent with my body, with my face" (406). Cinema, in Sontag's diagnosis, provided one example of the apotheosis of aesthetic access and involvement. Films are absorbing, totalizing – not just intellectually or emotionally, but physically, also:

"The desire to lose yourself in other people's lives... faces. This is a larger, more inclusive form of desire embodied in the movie experience. Even more than what you appropriated for yourself was the experience of surrender to, of being transported by, what was on the screen. You wanted to be kidnapped by the movie – and to be kidnapped was to be overwhelmed by the physical presence of the image."<sup>52</sup>

To be "overwhelmed by the physical presence" might be one description of the aesthetic sensibility that defines some of the styles of relating to art portrayed in *The Volcano Lover*. As discussed, the Cavaliere's relation to objects he admires which announce themselves as primarily visual is almost always accompanied by a physical intention. With his great passion, the Vesuvius, the relation is construed in part in terms of converging patterns of time: "The point is to get a good rhythm, to make it mindless, almost as in a daydream. To walk like breathing. To make it what the body wants, what the air wants, what time wants" (31). Conversely, we see it in the scenes with Catherine at the piano and Emma in her attitudes that the creation of art is necessarily embedded in a kind of total embrace of the physical, in which their status as feeling, bodied selves converges with the work being created.

Catherine and William enact one of the novel's exemplary intervals: "Though designed not to be consummated, it was still a romance" (92). Because they both love other people who either do not love them, they are able to take good care of one another in a "classic [form] of heterosexual romantic love. In place of consummation, there is elevation. A secret society of

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<sup>52</sup> Sontag, "The Decay of Cinema."

two, they were constantly high, exalted, flushed with complicity” (94). The “high, exalted, flushed” quality of affect is not foreign to the way that characters in the novel are depicted as responding to their *aesthetic* passions, which, like the relationship between Catherine and William, are mostly unconsummated. Considered against one another, however, we might wonder whether indeed the aesthetic encounters *do* get to be “consummated” in a way that Catherine and William are restricted from. Is the hinge between viewer and viewed thing, or maker and product, more erotic – because possibly, ironically more embodied – than the alliance between Catherine and William?

Sontag’s criticism is threaded through with pronouncements about sexuality that conceptualize it largely as annihilating phenomenon; in its total version, the one that swallows all the physical being, it destroys categories, destroys awareness of self, to the end of constructing an alternative level or – in parlance more appropriate to a discussion about Sontag – a different *style* of metaphysical awareness. Emma accomplishes this, in a way, but her doing so is not unprecedented in the novel (even though it’s the first instance that the Cavaliere sees).

William and Catherine’s relationship displays for us one way that art adapts itself to manifest the bodily. When Catherine, a piano player and secret composer, indulges in her passion for music, she is described as exhibiting an expression not unlike that summoned during sex:

“She leaned forward, a strand of unpowdered hair falling across her forehead, her slightly flabby arms bowed as if to embrace the keyboard, her radiant face molded by feeling, her lips parted for soundless groaning and singing.

A lover would have recognized Catherine’s expressions at the piano, and anyone else would have felt privy to an involuntary revelation of how she behaved with a lover. Grimacing, wincing, sighing, nodding, smiling beatifically – she spanned several octaves of abandonment to pleasure. It was then, when William saw her most clearly as a sexual being, that he was most drawn to her, most intimidated, and most touched. She was so innocent, he supposed, about what the music meant to her and did to her.” (94)



Clearly, there is an unequivocal description of her artistic pursuit as engaging or inciting pleasure in a way that sex does. Sontag instates an obvious equivalence between sexual and aesthetic pleasure – in this case, both lead to “abandon.” We are also introduced, in the passage’s invocation of inappropriate disclosure (the “anyone else” theoretically “privy”), to the related issues of shame and revelation.

When the Cavaliere asks if she is afraid of the volcano, she responds, “Lordy, no, I want to see it!... I want to see everything” (126). She is the novel’s emblem of openness, and this desire – to “see everything” – becomes one of her core characteristics. It serves her well, this ability to incorporate, as we see from the Cavaliere and Charles’ approbation of her as a fast learner. But it has its other, more profound relevance, too, as she herself asserts in the final portion of speech, her free indirect discourse from beyond the grave in Part IV. In a passage charmingly filled with imperatives and instructions, Emma states that although she “heard the sound of [her] own voice”:

“There is a moment when one must be silent. That is the moment when you touch the other’s soul. Someone who is pouring out feeling – whom you have helped bring to that point, perhaps by display of your own feeling. And then you look deeply into the other’s eyes. You make a little mmmm or ahhh, an encouraging, sympathetic sound. For now, you just listen, really listen, and show that you take what you are hearing into your heart. Hardly anyone does this.” (405)

Each of the main characters in Sontag’s novel is sketched out partly in the terms of their aesthetic wakefulness – their receptivity. Reading these diverse attitudes and modes of relation offer foils against the Cavaliere’s way of looking. Notably, both Emma and Catherine undergo transformations – experiences of the aesthetic are, for them, at their most intense, also experiences of self-negation. While the Cavaliere is “hard put to imagine that he is anyone but himself” (114), Catherine is swallowed by the pleasure of her art, depersonalized. Nor is Emma any more immune to this un-anchoring. Amidst a season of lessons and of performing attitudes

for her Neapolitan audience, we are told Emma “does not know who she is anymore, but she knows herself to be ascending” (135).

Perhaps, aside from this style of Catherine’s, the closest in kind to Emma’s self-dissolving artistic omnivorousness is to be found in Sontag’s illustration of Goethe. Paraphrasing letters of his written during a trip to Italy (when he visited Hamilton’s Naples), Sontag’s Goethe writes, “I carry on looking. I am always studying. And, again: You will not recognize me. I scarcely recognize myself” (156). Looking enters into and transforms the inner framework. The Cavaliere wants static, the world outside to conform to his internal types. Whereas Emma, Catherine, Goethe – all of them are interested in a kind of continuity.<sup>53</sup>

The Cavaliere’s gaze is posited against this kind of propensity for the dynamic. He, who, for the most part, abides to a strict hierarchy concerning the sensible experiences worthy of admission into himself, is defined of a relation to the world that not only distances but which also pretends as though it can pause time. Whereas Emma is “brought to tears” by “anyone’s emotional distress” (164), the Cavaliere is desperate for a measured coolness: he “did not like to feel too much, but he was alarmed by the evident waning of feeling. He wanted to go on feeling not too much, not too little either (as he wanted to be neither young nor old)” (109).

Much of the experience the Cavaliere refuses to engage with is explicitly described as part of the life of the lower class. For him, a dismissal is “one of the rare occasions for looking closely at a servant’s face” (250) – a comment itself included in the narrative only once enclosed in parentheses, as though the details of that world only barely admissible into the body of the text itself. Notes like these make it clear that the Cavaliere is not simply one dedicated to locating

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<sup>53</sup> Constantine considers William Hamilton as being possessed of a different responsiveness, writing in his conclusion that Hamilton “touched on the new sensibility in Goethe, lived with it tolerantly in Catherine and Beckford, but was himself of the world that was in the process of passing away.” p. 292

himself in the world by an extreme and morally-minded version of close attention. To him, one gets to pick and choose. The Cavaliere's filtered gaze partly serves to transform time so as to avoid perceiving the nature of an unpleasant situation. "Living abroad facilitates treating life as a spectacle," we are told. Consequently, "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" (21) – against the "unending" (and, if unchanging, then also in a sense without time), "hardened" image of cruelty and incompetence that the Neapolitan public see, the Cavaliere imagines a pleasant. His style of looking transforms that which is being captured, and it's partly this attitude that charges his relationship to the Vesuvius: "To love volcanoes was to put the revolution in its place. To live in proximity to the memory of a disaster, to live among ruins – Naples, or Berlin today – is to be reassured that one can survive any disaster, even the greatest" (162). Disastrous portents like the volcano are ways of calling up tragedy, making it proximate, so as to keep it in control.

In one of the novel's first scenes, as the Cavaliere rides out of London in a carriage with Catherine, the lack of any obviously available distractions for his "hungry eyes" lead him to indulge in "that other, always adjacent interior: a book" (17). At the same time as he sits in his plushly lined vehicle, there is an accident on the street outside: "The beggar, overtaken by one of the coaches, is knocked back and drops under the wheel of a plodding cooper's cart. The Cavaliere wasn't looking. He was looking away."

The Cavaliere does not find the brutality of the world appropriate for his attention or investment. The rest of the carriage sequence carries forth in his characteristic avoidant style: "The dirt, the stink, the noise are without... He drifted between the desire to look, as if to engrave on his brain, and the inclination to confine his senses to the cool carriage, to consider

himself (as he is in truth) already gone.” Everything is conceptualized in terms of his sensory framework; if imperceptible to him (or blocked from perception), then also nonexistent. The final sentence in the chapter states that, to the Cavaliere, “. . .soon London was only a road” (18). This is the final end of such distancing – to reduce the multiple, the wide and the profuse, into “a road,” a flat track, an avenue to the next spectacle.

The collector’s posture has its own pleasures, many of which are intellectually complex and worthwhile, but ultimately the Cavaliere’s lack of discourse with the world – the distance permitted by the collector’s status – is, surprisingly, also an obstacle to inwardness. The passage moves from detailing the pleasures and successes of his collecting to some place quite else, an unexpected admission of the comfort that Catherine’s attention (*her* empathy, *her* care) gave him:

“Collectors and curators of collections often admit without too much prodding to misanthropic feelings. They confirm that, yes, they have cared more than inanimate things than for people. Let the others be shocked – they know better. You can trust the things. They never change their nature. Their attractions do not pall. Things, rare things, have intrinsic value, people the value your own need obliges you to assign to them. Collecting gives egotism the accents of passion, which is always attractive, while arming you against the passions that make you feel most vulnerable. It makes those who feel deprived, and hate feeling deprived, feel safer. He had not known how much Catherine’s love also made him feel safe.” (108-9)

Every sentence here, save the last, attempts to valorize the collector’s distanced mode. The figure who is like the Cavaliere and can “admit to misanthropy” is the one who “knows better,” who is surrounded only by the constancy of that which “does not pall” (that is, has somehow managed to cheat the inevitable). Though the statement about rare things having “intrinsic value” is clearly debatable (and, therefore, reads to us more like self-persuasion than as the rest of the passage’s tempered self-regard), the remark about being bestowed the “accents of passion” while

simultaneously protecting one from being vulnerable rings true: the distanced gaze is a kind of armor against the deepest investment, and, by extension, against loss.

The triumphs of the channeled style, which Catherine and Emma each embody, if in different ways – these triumphs may be tenuous, even compromising, but they provide these women with an unparalleled sensory involvement in the world. “When she played, he could see the music. It was an arc surging upward from her delicately tapping feet, streaming through her body, and exiting through her hands.” (94) Later, William states that “It seemed... as if she had thrown her own essence into the music, whose effects were the emanations of a pure, uncontaminated mind. The art and the person were one” (98).

Though the narrator notes that William’s approbation only accompanies Catherine’s performances of other composer’s art (never her own), and that, in a way, he seems to appreciate her work for its purity – its negation of herself – the emphasis on the physical nature of her playing foregrounds her experience by not only pointing to but also unifying her “spirit” with her body. After all, the sound becomes physicalized as an “arc,” and the attentions of that earlier paragraph are all directed to the agile extremities of foot and hand.

When William eventually re-enters the narrative, long after Catherine’s death and Emma’s marriage to Hamilton, he comes back as an emblem of an extreme, sickened version of this ideal. He has now built with his fortune “A cathedral of art... in which all the strong sensations our limited sensory organs crave will be amplified and all uplifting thoughts of which our slender spirit is capable will be awakened” (342). During the tour through his grotesque palace he gives to the Cavaliere, the Hero, and to Emma, he advises them that, “When completed, my Abbey will leave nothing to the imagination. It will *be* the imagination, given tangible form” (343).

In Emma's case as in Catherine's aesthetic pursuits are dedicated to "making tangible" those aspects of the imagination otherwise limited to song, sculpture, and painting. As she says of herself in Part IV, in her only lengthy sequence of free indirect discourse, "I was adept at the piano, but I never played as Catherine did, I am sure. I lacked the necessary melancholy, the inwardness. But I could represent emotions with my body, with my face. Everyone marveled at my Attitudes" (406). In this section of the novel, Emma explains her own propensity to being looked at as motivated by the want "to awaken them [her viewers] and make them see how glorious this existence was" (405).

This differs from Charles' focus on "strong sensations" and "uplifting thoughts." Those aspects are prescriptive, instructional, whereas Emma's engagement seems to be more towards the end of opening up perception in her viewers (a process that the novel's earlier Pygmalion story illustrates as bestowing great pleasure). Indeed, the attitudes are described as being so successful because of "Her capacity for expressiveness, her unshakeable desire to make contact with others, [which] had found its highest outlet in this theatre of simulated, ancient emotions." (148)

Emma is utterly a catalyst for appreciating (or confronting) one's own embodiment. Partly this is a consequence of her being so comfortable, so dexterous, with her own. Performing the attitudes, we are told, "was not like donning a mask – one must have a very loose relation to one's body" (145). The acting she undergoes is not about pasting a face atop her pretty surface, but about reconstituting the way she moves. While she is "encrusted" in the imagery of those she portrays (especially, as discussed earlier, in the historical sense), the heart of her expressiveness seems to be located elsewhere. Even though she uses her body as "envelope" for narratives that pre-exist and stand outside of her, she is described as the one possessed of intention, much in the

fashion of a more traditional type of artist: “Then, once she was in possession of the subject, came the challenging part – finding the right moment, the moment that presents meaning, that sums up the essence of a character, a story, an emotion. It was the same hard choice painters were supposed to make” (146).

Emma’s empathy runs in both directions, and she seems to have an inexhaustible capacity to undergo the others’ inner plights. The suggestion of symmetry between her willingness to incorporate feeling and her ability to express, to embody – the overall constitutions these qualities precipitate are parallel. In love as in art, it seems, Emma becomes totally possessed in much the same way:

“It doesn’t matter, the tarantella is inside you. You always had a pretext for performing, you were a living statue or a painter’s model, reproducing the postures and demeanor of some figure of history or poetry, you impersonated, or Attitudinized, as those who pillory you are now wont to say, you sang, with another’s cry or gaiety at your mouth... You are just you. Pure energy, pure defiance, pure foreboding.” (351)

## *Conclusion*

“Well, it does educate us about life. I wouldn’t be the person I am, I wouldn’t understand what I understand, were it not for certain books. I’m thinking of the great question of nineteenth-century Russian literature: how should one live? A novel worth reading is an education of the heart. It enlarges your sense of human possibility, of what human nature is, of what happens in the world. It’s a creator of inwardness.”<sup>54</sup>

It would be remiss to retreat from a novel with the word “*Lover*” in the title without addressing more directly what vision of intimacy, of empathy, the novel has to present. “Psychic trauma, as emotional cannibalism, as mechanistic exercise,”<sup>55</sup> is how Leland Poague describes Sontag’s overall attitude towards sexuality. He writes,

“we might acknowledge Sontag’s view of sexuality as no less paradoxical than any number of her positions. She can see sex as profoundly brutal and dangerous, as she does in... *The Volcano Lover*. But there is also a more Utopian picture of sexuality available in Sontag, though it does involve a kind of erasure.”<sup>56</sup>

Poague refers briefly to Sontag’s work about androgyny as the locus in her work where this “Utopian” sexual life might be found, and moves on.

I do not think it is accurate to dismiss *The Volcano Lover* as providing no imagination of an ideal relation between amorous subjects. It simply is not true that every relationship of devotion is here about the attrition of one of the partners, about the erasure of their nature or the undermining of their power.

For all the textual and meta-textual concerns that are attached to the novel’s elaboration of a system of empathy and of openness – its attempt to illustrate a way out of a solipsistic relation to the world – *The Volcano Lover* is indeed very much, as John Banville complained,

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<sup>54</sup> Sontag, “The Art of Fiction CXLIII,” p. 193

<sup>55</sup> Leland Poague, “The Way She Writes Now: Notes on Sontag,” in *Susan Sontag: An Annotated Bibliography*, eds. Leland Poague and Kathy A. Parsons (New York: Garland & Parsons, 2000), p. xxviii

<sup>56</sup> Poague, “The Way She Writes Now: Notes on Sontag,” p. xxviii



possessed of “a passionate moral intelligence.” And part of what this moral intelligence offers is an articulation of what it is to love.

The Cavaliere looks out at the world the way that he does so as to instate himself in history, relate himself to the landscape, and never, in the process of doing either, risk his own protection. This is not the look that everyone exerts, nor is its accompanying style of empathy (or lack thereof) the only way the characters in *The Volcano Lover* can look at one another.

For all her complicity in the condemned regime, Emma is an emblem of qualities that suggest kindness. Even her art, which emphasizes the beauty of her form (and which thus makes it so easy to relegate her to being just another woman who capitalizes on the sexual attention of dubious men), is equated with her capacity for empathy.

How tenderly we read Emma, who expects so little from the world: “She doesn’t miss Charles any more. She is resigned, she is triumphant. She knew she would never experience passionate love again, nor does she hope to.” Emma, who, upon arrival in Naples, is able to abandon her own impetuositities and desires, to place them up on a high shelf within herself, and proceeds to perform as she is called-up: “She knows how to give pleasure, and does so as wanted” (148).

Yet all this changes when she meets the Hero. The relationship between Emma and Nelson’s double works out to become, perhaps, one of the novel’s most optimistic alliances. When together, it seems they are able to shed the coats of persona and love each other in a manner that forgives their so-called “deficiencies” (Emma’s growing body, Nelson’s missing arm – the “poor scorched stump” of which she kisses). “In here, inside their love, honesty becomes possible.”

Prior descriptions have drawn up the total physical surrender to art as nearly an end, the dissolution, of physical awareness; the novel has also suggested that this surrender accompanies an increased capacity for empathy. The sexual aspects of the relationship between the two are also characterized by various annihilations, twinned by the identification the couple find with each other. For instance, Sontag places Emma's body in a zone where it is almost continuous with Nelson's: "She lay her head on his right shoulder, he held her with his left arm... It is your place. Your body is my arm" (263).

It might initially read as though the dominating male sea captain is here acquiring yet another woman to augment his masculinity. Not so: their sexual personalities are playful (they "laugh"), they acknowledge their potential for androgyny ("He had the most beautiful skin of any man she had ever known, soft as a girl's"). Where Emma seems to become physically absorbed by the Hero when her body is made to seem like his arm, there is an equal, and oppositional way in which she incorporates his. In the shorthand of the heart, "he wanted to be dominated by her, he wanted to be flooded by her with emotion." And yet physically, "Weight against weight; fluid with fluid; inside against, filled, packed with outside. He felt he she was swallowing him, and he wanted to live inside her." There are no longer lines to demarcate the discrete edges of bodies or categories by which the characters are, in their lives otherwise, so bound up.

For Emma, the discovery of her experience with the Cavaliere is partly also the discovery that she could "see him feeling what she is feeling," because "she never imagined a man could feel as she did." Save for this moment, all other manifestations of sexuality in *The Volcano Lover* have orbited around dominance over Emma – not only being able to possess her (as the Cavaliere technically does, when he and Greville exchange her for money), but also in being able to project

whatever meanings one pleases, even those that deny her of her subjecthood. The shocking aspect of these scenes Sontag has written is that she has re-appropriated sexual desire, which has been rendered so thoroughly suspicious by its effects in the rest of the novel, as a mode of manifesting empathy.

But it is not just the amorous partner that the subject wants to stay with, to keep near, to be *like*, as well as just to be. Emma's final act on earth is to protect her daughter (who is aware of being the Hero's daughter) from the knowledge that her mother is, shamefully, a drunk: "Nothing, not even the certainty of losing heaven, could make me tell her the truth" (416).

What else? Emma, in her speech from death, remarks on her own "improvements" under the Cavaliere's influence but admits that "had I not loved my mother so much, I do not doubt I would have shed all traces of my rustic origins, and spoken an English pure as moonlight" (406). This is the lover's impulse: to prefer the blemish of a regional tongue over the "pure," because of what it means (an index of her mother's life). What the lover's look embodies is generosity, a fondness for the slightly askew, the sweetly lopsided: "The soul of the lover is the opposite of the collector's. The defect or blemish is part of the charm. A lover is never a sceptic" (232). The novel thus delivers two utopian imaginations: one in the visually annihilating intimacy of a tactile, physical encounter; the other in the emotionally self-sacrificing relationship between child and mother. (Sontag's dedication: "For David. Beloved son, comrade.")

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