American Characters Reflected in Susan Sontag's Literary Writings

Song Shenli (宋沈黎)
College of Foreign Languages, Zhejiang Gongshang University [1]
Foreign Language College
Zhejiang Gongshang University
Xia Sha City-University-Town, Hangzhou, Zhejiang, 310018
China

Abstract

The influential yet controversial American writer and critic Susan Sontag, is reputable for her sharp insight and profound learning, Sontag's writings cover a wide range of fields, including social criticism, literary creation, cultural studies, and political critiques. To further understand Sontag's contributions to contemporary American literature and culture, this thesis is aimed at exploring the formation of her thematic consideration and the employment of artistic techniques so as to reveal the core values of Sontag's creative writings.

Key Words: American Characters; National identity; Utopia

But there's everything in Shakespeare.
Exactly. As in America.
America is meant to mean everything.
— Susan Sontag, *In America*

At the end of the twentieth century, Susan Sontag stands as a highly visible international figure for her established fame in the literary circle and the domain of social criticism. As an essayist, short story writer, novelist and a leading commentator on modern culture, Susan Sontag has produced many essays covering such diverse topics as camp, pornographic literature, fascist aesthetics, photography, AIDS, and revolution in the third world countries. Within the American literary circle, she was called "a literary pinup," and "the dark lady of American Letters," while she remains as one of 50 Great Living Americans in Marquis's *Who's Who* (1995). Ranking number 61 on *Life*'s list of "Women Who Shook the World," (1995) Sontag has been named a Chevalier in the Order of Arts and Letters in Paris (1995) and has won a Macarthur "genius" award (1990) and the Montblanc de la Culture award (1994) for her humanitarian work in Sarajevo.

For many critics, Sontag has become a symbol with rich intellectual, cultural, and political connotations. The standard description of this unique figure in the late 1960s, as *Partisan Review* director William Phillips noted, "is that of the up-to-date radical, a stand-in for everything advanced, extreme and outrageous" (Kennedy 1). In fact, Sontag has been made into not one, but many symbols: "The Evangelist of the New," "Miss Camp," "The Conscience of America" and "The last Intellectual." Sontag's contribution to American cultural criticism cannot be easily prised apart from such popular conceptions. Probably "the most widely read intellectual of her generation, her critical trajectory from the early 1960s to today has been a highly public one" (Kennedy 2).

In introducing Susan Sontag's literary contribution, the author of this thesis must weave her novels and essays with Sontag's own confirmation in titling her 1969's book *Styles of Radical Will*. Just as this title suggests, Sontag indeed situates herself as representing one style of the radical will. The strength of the mind and the nature of art are always a matter of serious, willed heroics for her, to some extent, being self-corrective, in her distinguished, tough manner. Just as her comments goes,

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"The new American radicalism is, I think, undeniably more intelligent and more sensitive and more creative than the so-called Old Left. But it is also, as part of these same virtues, more provincial, more excruciatingly American. If the main struggle at this moment is to establish an alternative or adversary culture, it is entirely American that that struggle flourishes around the goal of freedom (not, for instance, justice). And even more specifically American is what is understood as the content of freedom—the guarantee of freedom to the individual.

American radical thought verges on a kind of Adam Smith doctrine according to which, even in matters of revolution, the pursuit of private advantage inexorably leads to public benefit. Americans are notoriously optimistic people, but I think we shall have to wait a long time for our Laissez-faire revolution." (qtd. in Sayre 131)

Having made a radical break with postwar criticism of the 1950s, Sontag left a great impact on experimental art in the 1960s and 1970s. Introducing many new thought-provoking ideas to American culture, her work greatly blurred the boundaries between high and popular culture with its advocating of an aesthetic approach to the culture study, emphasizing style over content. So far her name has already become synonymous with a lot of expectations—most notably of "the dream of self-creation, of self-fulfillment, of standing alone, on the cutting edge, articulate, independent, and attractive" (Rollyson and Paddock xiii).

The controversy over American identity remains a central concern in Sontag's creative writings, such as *In America*, in which the protagonists Maryna and Bogdan are impressed by Americans' belief in wanting things and getting things. In Sontag's view, they also have doubts about how much they have to do beyond the wanting. According to her observation, even America "has its America" (*IA* 120). The future is always somewhere else, which much closely corresponds to R.W.B. Lewis's arguments in *The American Adam*, who believes that the image of Adam embodies the contemporary ideas of "the authentic Americans as a figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities, poised at the start of a new history." No matter how "illusory" or "vulnerable," this image has invariably "an air of adventurousness, a sense of promise and possibility," with "its openness to challenge, its susceptibility to controversy" (Lewis 1). Generally speaking, there are two different kinds of qualities to be invoked about the image of an early American: one is referred as the planning, originating desire, the one that seeks and finds means for its fulfillment, which gets Europeans to America, as well as gets anyone, Europeans or Americans, to achieve anything at all. The other one presents itself as a much lonelier, powerless evocation of the will, which represents lingering desire without any hope or means of fulfillment, since all we have is the willing itself, supposed to be capable of magically turning out thought into action. America was not the end-product of a long historic process: it was something entirely new. The new habits to be engendered on the new American scene were suggested by the image of a radically new personality, the hero of the new adventure.

Yet during the Second Reconstruction, a period when race moved to the foreground as America struggled to live up to its ideal of freedom for all its citizens, national identity turned out to be a variable thing whose connotation has been changing all the time under the impact of the black and other ethnic freedom movements. At the same time, white American scholars also maintain an evolving attitude toward blackness, whiteness, and "Americanness". Race is, and always has been, central to American experience. As for the term "Americanism," Kasba Maase states in his article "'Americanization', 'Americanness' and 'Americanisms': Time for a Change in Perspective" that people initially subscribed it to a patriotism which is critical of the failings within Anglo-American society. Deeply troubled by the sectional division caused by the Civil War and by Gilded Age materialism, they celebrate the Revolutionary past originally as a utopian dream of national possibility, though after the devastating Depression of 1893, American people's "Americanism" altered dramatically to a defense of existing governmental institutions, with an increasingly militaristic imagery that emphasized laws rather than freedom, and identified immigration and labor activities as the major threats of American society. Finally, distinctive Americanism uses certain goods and practices, which have an air of "Americanness" around them, in order to gain an advantage in struggles for recognition.

Although the above-mentioned terms like "Americanism" and "Americanness" are often mentioned by literary and cultural critics, the definite explanations of them remains an unsolved issue for debates. What is an American identity? The answers are multiple, but one reasonable answer comes from Samuel Huntington who in his recent book *Who Are We* defines American identity "in terms of race, ethnicity, culture, and most importantly religion." (Huntington 38) In this book, he also analyzes the prospects for American identity in the following four aspects:

"First, the dissolution of the Soviet Union eliminated one major and obvious threat to American security and hence reduced the salience of national identity compared to subnational, transnational, binational, and other-national identities. Second, the ideologies of multiculturalism and diversity eroded the legitimacy of the remaining central elements of American identity, the cultural core and the American Creed. Third, America's third major wave of immigration that began in the 1960s brought to America people primarily from Latin America and Asia rather than Europe as the previous waves did. Fourth, never before in American history has close to a majority of immigrants spoken a single non-English language."(Huntington 17-18)

In fact, Sontag herself also contributes as a share in shaping this American identity. Besides the story of her fictional characters' experiencing the long and painful Americanization process, Sontag's own intellectual life also displays a certain feature that confirms her national identity, that is, always treat life and history as an exile just beginning. Representing a radically new personality like "the hero of a new adventure," Sontag in her discourse places herself as "an individual emancipated from the history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, readily to confront whatever awaited [her] with the aid of [her] own unique and inherent resources" (Lewis 5). Therefore, to understand the writer's nature and unique personality, it is necessary to investigate into her life experience and social contextualization.

In the 1960s Sontag had close contact with "New York intellectuals" through connection with the *Partisan Review*, while she also contributed to various other periodicals, including *New York Review of Books*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Nation*, and *Harper's*. At the age of 30, Sontag started her career as a novelist with publication of her first novel, *The Benefactor*, a heavily symbolic work about the formation of character, which served as a preparation for Sontag's essays about arts, as she later asserted in *Against Interpretation* that people should not attempt to find the "meaning" in a work of art but experience it as a thing itself. In the early sixties, Sontag swiftly acquired a reputation on the bohemian New York background as the radical-liberal American woman, who had not only profound knowledge of ancient and modern European culture, but could also reinterpret it from the American point of view.

When Sontag made her debut on the New York intellectual scene in the early 1960s it was a time when American intellectual culture had developed to a stage that was ready for change. In the early essays collected in *Against Interpretation* (1966), Sontag polemically stated her avant-gardist tastes and mocked the parochialism of American arts and criticism. Offering to recast intellectual agendas, Sontag seemed to catch, or even further, to lead the new American tendency, a "new sensibility" as she called in her own phrase. With a desire to be recognized as a creative writer, a novelist, Sontag has been submitted to a media exposure hitherto rare in American intellectual circle and taken on an iconic significance at a time of rapid cultural changes and radicalization. For the last thirty-five years, Susan Sontag has given hundreds of interviews broadcast on television and radio and printed in newspapers and journals around the world, though her career as a novelist was interrupted by certain issues of the time that demanded treatment in the essay form.

Through four decades, public response to Susan Sontag and her works remained irreconcilably divided. She was described by the *NYT*, in a variety of modifiers, as

"explosive, anticlimactic, original, derivative, naïve, sophisticated, approachable, aloof, condescending, populist, puritanical, sybaritic, sincere, posturing, ascetic, voluptuary, right-wing, left-wing, profound, superficial, ardent, bloodless, dogmatic, lucid, inscrutable, visceral, reasoned, chilly, effusive, relevant, passé, ambivalent, tenacious, ecstatic, melancholic, humorous, humorless, deadpan, rhapsodic, cantankerous and clever. But nobody ever called her dull." (Fox, *NYT* B3)

Delving into the paradoxical aspects of Sontag's intellectual position and reputation, some other critics consider the fact that Sontag has been politically active while remaining stubbornly "literary" as a source of controversy, and criticize her art for being "too European, too cold."

Sontag's tenuous position as a second-generation New York intellectual is sketched out with her indebtedness to European modernism as explicated by reference to her short story, "pilgrimage." Facing a danger that its "aesthetic turns idolatrous in its very efforts to be iconoclastic" in her devotion to the modernist ethos, Sontag treated it as the substance of her fiction.

Self engaged as a book reviewer, as analyst of mass culture, with the AIDS crisis, Sontag sustains a willingness to provoke, working as much "against herself" as against culture in general. Her "self-cultivated" intellectual autonomy has been generally understood as a potent myth which both sustains the structures of cultural work and contains secondary works about her within specific structures of cultural value while her self-styled "amateurism" has enabled her to bring to questions of culture, politics, and intellect a distinctive form and angle of inquiry which seeks to open up spaces for critical thinking.

In the 1970s, she began to self-consciously distance herself from the avant-gardist and radical labels, however, public view about this cultural figure has not changed much in the last two decades. Writing in 1969, *Partisan Review* director William Phillips observed:

"More than any other writer today, Susan Sontag has suffered from bad criticism and good publicity. If she could be rescued from all her culture-hungry interpreters, it might be possible to find the writer who has been made into a symbol. This is no longer easy because a popular conception of her has rigged before a natural one could develop—like a premature legend." (Kennedy 1)

It is not easy to find a writer "who has been made into a symbol" in William Phillips's term, for the cultural significance of this writer combines both the idea and the image, which reside in the body of writings she has produced, as well as in the public role she performs. With her writings and public performances, Sontag stands as such a singular, if not sole, cultural symbol who endeavors to carve out a way for her nation's moral salvation.

Based on the study of her major works, especially two novels *The Volcano Lover* (1992) and *In America* (2000), and a play, *Alice in Bed* (1993), the author of the thesis attempts to examine the relationship between the artistic self-consciousness of creative writings and the innovative contextualization of the reality in order to situate her contributions within the conception of the intellectual life in the United States. Through an in-depth analysis of Sontag's understanding of the modern American society as presented in her historical novels, the author tries to make investigations on such subjects as American spirits, American characters and the American Dreams, of which Sontag offers a new definition in her creative writings.

With the "lenses" of its narrative device, Sontag's historical writings serve as an extended metaphor, reflecting various components of national identity of the contemporary US that the writer has observed. Through a vivid portraying of her fictional characters and their experiences, Sontag demonstrates her own definition of American culture and values thus the process of her protagonists' self-exile and self-rebuilding becoming a dramatic explanation of American characters. The American scholar Samuel P. Huntington in his recent work pointed out that Americans "could again find their national identity and their national purposes in their culture and religion" (Huntington 20). Exploring on this subject, Sontag's literary creation acts exactly as an artistic experiment in redefining these "national identity" and "national purposes".

The readers may wonder what America looks like on earth in Sontag's vision? As a country, Sontag says in "What's Happening to America", an article published in *Partisan Review* that America "was created mainly by the surplus poor of Europe, reinforced by a small group who were just *Europamude* (a literary catchword in the 1840s), tired of Europe. Yet even the poorest knew both a 'culture,' largely invented by his social betters and administered from above, and a 'nature' that had been pacified for centuries…" (*Partisan Review* 52). It is just like the narrator of *In America* uncovers in Chapter Zero, most of them "…being poor unworldly villagers with occupations like peddler, innkeeper, woodcutter, Talmud student," (*IA* 23) with a common wish of breaking away from their past, and with America as their dreaming destination. Living on a land free of past bondages and full of opportunities, Americans proudly assured immigrants that "theirs was the greatest country on earth, the proof being that everyone knew about America and everyone wanted to come there" (*IA* 100). So does Bogdan, Maryna's Polish aristocratic husband, reflect in his diary,

"Americans have turned out to excel at freeing themselves from the past… The past is not really important here. Here the present does not reaffirm the past but supersedes and cancels it. The weakness of any attachment to the past is perhaps the most striking thing about the Americans. It makes them seem superficial, shallow, but it gives them great strength and self-confidence. They do not feel dwarfed by *anything*." (*IA* 223)

In the novel, when Maryna and her followers first move to Anaheim, a small village in America, they were disappointed to have only foreigners, instead of "real" Americans, for neighbors.

When the more they know the villagers, however, they come to realize that although their neighbors still speak German they really are Americans. And finally they became real Americans themselves as well. It seems easier for someone from Europe to become an American. As a country populated by European immigrants, America was filled up by new generations of the poor, and built up according to the "tawdry fantasy of the good life that culturally deprived, uprooted people might have at the beginning of the industrial era" (Sontag, *Partisan Review* 52). At the very beginning of a new era, it also stands for advanced technology and material civilization, both of which are rapidly progressing on the track of modernization. Two days after their arrival in America, Julian, went off alone to the Centennial Exposition in which the latest prodigies of American inventiveness were on display—the telephone! The typewriter! The mimeograph machine! — this new visitor "returned after a day in Philadelphia enchanted with what he had seen" (*IA* 118). "Thick soft gaslight" is replaced by electricity though the actors refused this unlovely replacement, because "in America no one could refuse the imperatives of progress. [What] was obsolete, and that was the end of it." With an incomparable courage, Americans always follow the fashion and bear a special "partiality for the new decreed: whatever is, can be improved. Or ought to be replaced" (*IA* 354).

Under Sontag's pen, America is delineated as one of the greatest countries, an ideal paradise, a land of freedom. On this promising new land, "you're whatever you think you are, whatever you *dare* think you are. And to be free to think yourself something you're not (not yet), something better than what you're— isn't that the true freedom promised by the country? Everyone wants to be free," and "in America, everyone is free…Free to make money" (*IA* 93-101). Sontag writes like an exile herself who believes in the sheer force of will, employing which she can conjure up the past. America therefore turns out to be a place where people had collected, immemorially, to live. "This was a place people had chosen, wrested form nothingness, were zealously developing—modern." And all that seemed very American, as the new arrivals understood their new country, even if it felt sometimes as if they weren't really in America. But that was America too, "an odd country, perhaps the oddest country of all, welcoming every European nationality, and…English wasn't the language of California's natives, either" (*IA* 163).

It is also a country that devotes most of its worshiping to hardworking and money. "Everything here is business in America" (*IA* 281). The writer tells you, "Get out of New York. Nobody cares about anything here except money. Go out west. Go to California. It's paradise. Everyone wants to go there." The country welcomes intelligent and diligent people and promises them with rewarding happiness and at the same time, turns its lazy visitors down with its cold harshness. This labor-worshiping morality makes Americans distinguished from the "indolent, old-fashioned" European who actually "has no place here" (*IA* 212). No wonder Ryszard, the Polish writer, satirically denotes that America is "a country insane enough to declare the pursuit of happiness to be an inalienable right" (*IA* 180). He suspected that Socialism had little future here, as he once told Maryna, because in America "the admiration of the poor for the rich seemed even more unassailable than the fealty enjoyed by monarchs and priests in Europe" (*IA* 230-31). Cultural discrimination also prevails this country, which makes the assimilation process never easy for Mexicans. "Poor Mexicans will always be lowly foreigners to these newly minted Americans, while the few wealthy Mexicans remind me of our gentry back home—they are valiant, haughty, extravagant, hospitable, ceremonious, lazy—and destined to be pushed aside by the Americans with their unrelenting practicality and passion for work" (*IA* 212).

Instead of a real entity in existence, America appears in Sontag's novel more like a conception, an ideal, and a product of imagination. "But that's what this country's about. We try everything. We're a country of idealists." Even America, Ryszard thinks, "has its America, its best destination where everyone dreams of going" (*IA* 120). If the Poles dream of going to New York, then New Yorkers also dream of California. In her writings, Sontag compares America to the Noah's Ark, an Ark of "escapees from every flood, every disaster on earth, already the third largest city in the known world, was not going to be the only one of its kind. Wherever there is promise there will be this ugliness, this vitality, this discontent, as well as this self-congratulation" (*IA* 120). When Ryszard's ship lands, he is astonished at the size of Manhattan. Unlike the "confined microcosm" of the ship, the city seems to contain elements of "everywhere." Preparing for the trip to California, he notices a poster promising it is the land of paradise for the laborer. In the eyes of those passionate revolutionists and immigrants who had suffered successive failures and delusion in the Old World, America has a "spell".

"It was New York that produced this spell, or maybe it was America. Hamerica, made too mythical by a suffusion of dreams, of expectations, of fears that no reality could support—for everyone in Europe has views about this country, is fascinated by America, imagines it to be idyllic or barbaric and, however conceived, always a kind of solution. And all the while, deep down you are not entirely convinced it really exists. But it does!" (*IA* 117)

On the other side of the coin, however, Sontag also denounces America for being a "curious hybrid—an apocalyptic country and a valetudinarian country" (Sontag, *Partisan Review* 54). In "America, Seen Through Photographs, Darkly," Sontag discusses how photographers have taken on Walt Whitman's program of absorbing the whole country through his art. However, as the essay's title implies, neither Whitman nor his latter-day followers can encompass a nation. No art, no medium, is that comprehensive. Photographs are a dim representation of the truth, the dark glass, as it were, of St. Paul's metaphor. Through the photographers of Sontag's generation, America is indeed seen "darkly"—as the "quintessential Surrealist country," as a "freak show, a wasteland" (*OP* 48). Even the American energy extolled by many foreigners, to which both the country's unparalleled economic prosperity and the splendid vivacity of its arts and entertainments attribute is actually "bad at its source.

Basically it is the energy of violence, of free-floating resentment and anxiety unleashed by chronic cultural dislocations which must be, for the most part, ferociously sublimated into crude materialism and acquisitiveness" (Sontag, *Partisan Review* 55). Borrowing her characters' voice, Sontag comments that America has "no respect for culture, theatre as we know it means nothing to them, plebeian entertainments are all they want" (*IA* 126-27). Later, Maryna reaffirms that theatre in America "does seem to mean something other than what it means chez nous and in Vienna and Paris. The public expects to be entertained, not elevated, and is most entertained by the grandiose and the bizarre" (*IA* 139). In a letter to Henryk, this actress writes: "It occurs to me that, for all their boasts about having the biggest and the most of everything, Americans, when it comes to art, are surprisingly devoid of patriotic self-confidence. It is false to say that the public craves only plebeian entertainments. But it is assumed that performances of quality come from abroad. Foreign actors make quite a splash here …" (*IA* 140).

Another significant American character presented in Sontag's writings lies in the whole nation's unique focus on individuality. "What is paramount in America is the personal calendar, the personal journey. *My* birthday, *my* life, *my* happiness" (*IA* 213). However, over obsessed with their individuality and personal fulfillment, Americans frequently trap themselves into restlessness, incapable of appreciating the beauty of self-effacing and selflessness. Maryna realizes from her acting career that "happiness depended on not being trapped in your individual existence, a container with your name on it. You have to forget yourself, your container. You have to attach yourself to what takes you outside yourself, what stretches the world" (*IA* 216). In Sontag's discourse, this emphasis on individuality leans much more on the protagonists' spirit of self-searching and self-reliance. Treating life as an exile during which many of them rebuild their identities, the immigrants make themselves more American through a daring exertion of their power of will.

Therefore, America remains a territory "where a whole country of people believe in the will" (*IA* 342). Not surprisingly, then, *In America* also evokes the power of the will. While acknowledging her utopian tendencies and her insecurities that she will prevail in America, Maryna declares, "I must and I will!" In a letter to her Polish friend Maryna writes that with a "strong enough will one can surmount any obstacle" (*IA* 128). In America, people were expected to display the "confusions of inner vehemence, to express opinions no one need take seriously, and have eccentric foibles and extravagant needs, which exhibited the force of [their] will, [their] appetitiveness, the spread of [their] self-regard—all excellent things" (*IA* 347). As a historical novel, *In America* has brought a subtle and complex meditation on America as the land of the will, or more precisely, as a land where the will is not so much presented as the force of a collective act of faith, an object believed by "a whole country of people." The novel's major character, Maryna Zalezowska recognizes "the old American tune, which conflates willing strenuously and taking for granted." The singer of the tune in this case should be Henry James, imagining he is more English than he is, taking himself for English because that is what he wants to be. "Henry James was very American after all," our heroine concludes. "he'd contrived to have at his proposal a vast allotment of willing" (*IA* 342-44). Obviously, Maryna is projected as a representative of the American will. In some perspective, this Polish actress is quite like an American, who is thought of a brave creature, an instance of perpetual self-invention, and to become an American actress, having been a Polish one, is always to carry the sense of a renewable world to extreme lengths.

To be an American, Ryszard thinks at the beginning of his voyage, is to be "free to think yourself something you're not yet, something better than what you are." Bogdan writes in his journal: "In Poland I thought that I was what I had to be. America means one can strive with fate" (*IA* 220). Furthermore, with its protagonist being a Polish actress, the novel is almost peopled by Europeans and it is through these foreigners' perspectives that comes many fine reflections on the idea of America. It's important to remember that the expert on the Polish actress and on the European view of American novelist, Sontag herself, fully present in this text as an imagining and reimagining mind. In such a framework, America is certainly not a fantasy or an illusion, but doubly dreamed as well as geographically real. There are Americans who have forgotten Europe, and there are Americans who never knew it. And there are Americans, Sontag's convoluted fiction suggests, who need to keep starting out again from Europe in order to arrive in their own history and their own present time.

Walter Kirn, in *New York* magazine, pointed out that it was America's energy, not its virtue, that Sontag most admired. The will extolled by all Americans including Sontag herself should serve as a force to rediscover and rebuild the self. As for immigrants, this equals the process of Americanization through which they cast off their former identities and acquires new self.

In America begins with an epigraph from Langston Hughes: "America will be!" which is a fitting start to the story of a woman's self-building through her practice of Americanization. She is fully aware of the likelihood of failure, but the romance of starting anew, the challenge of succeeding where communities such as Brook Farm failed, is too enticing not to pursue. Together with her a devoted husband, Bogdan; a young son, Piotr; and a young writer, Ryszard, who aspires to win her love, Maryna arrives at Anaheim after one month's drifting on the sea. From this character we can find the traces of the prototype Adam in E. W. B Lewis's arguments, the hero who dare to search for his dreaming paradise of Eden. When Lewis talks about the original image of Adam, he considers the American Adam as a figure of "heroic innocence and vast potentialities," always with an air of adventurousness, a sense of promise and possibility (Lewis 1). Maryna and her friends are exactly such idealists and adventurers, the perfect embodiment of modern Adams. In order to transform themselves from a foreigner to a qualified American citizen, each one of them undergoes a painstaking course of Americanization and suffers different degrees of disillusionment, conflicts and collisions. Samuel P. Huntington talks about the notion of Americanization in his recent work, asserting that the immigrants "adopts the clothes, the manners, and the customs generally prevailing here…substitutes for his mother tongue the English language," which insures that "his interests and affections have become deeply rooted here" and comes "into complete harmony with [American] ideals and aspirations, and cooperate[s] with [other Americans] for their attainment." When one has done this, he will have "the national consciousness of an American" (Huntington 131-32).

Among them, the heroine appears to be the most successful example. Tired of stage life, she longs for a release from these established fame, career and opinions. Desiring to recreate herself, she decided to quit acting and move to America. She has many reasons to go—such as her desire to live in a free country, her simple curiosity, her sense of adventure, and her wish to be known as more than a Polish actress. But none of these reasons seems as important as her ambition to succeed in the terms of a New World, which will give her the opportunity to forge a new identity. Told by local Americans that if they are willing to work hard, they can make a success of themselves in America. Maryna and her friends find Americans extremely self-satisfied and certain of their freedom. Arriving in Manhattan, Maryna dines at famous restaurants such as Delmonico's, attends performances of popular plays, and takes her son Piotr to the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. It is all an effort that she must deliberately pursue because, as she reflects: "You men have it much easier. You are commended for recklessness, for boldness, for striking out, for being adventurous.

A woman has so many inner voices telling her to behave prudently, amiably, timorously… Each time I am brave, I am acting. But that is all that's needed to be brave… The appearance of bravery. The performance of it" (*IA* 135). America exhilarates because it is unfinished and always "under way," she observes. But the utopian commune she establishes suffered doomed failure. By the end of six-month Utopian life, she decides to return to the stage and launch her career in America. She has then started the process of transforming herself into an American "star," the requirements of which receive considerable attention. With her success as an American star, Maryna remains restless and returns to Europe and makes a series of one-night performances. In London she finds a more reserved reception and thinks that America is more appealing because audiences revel in the sheer excitement of stardom. By the end of the novel, Maryna finds herself has become a 100 percent American. The process of Americanization is completed and she winds up with a new identity.

The novel begins on a winter night—"Irresolute, no, shivering, I'd crashed a party in the private dining room of a hotel" (*IA* 3). The party is taking place in Warsaw in 1876, but the gate-crasher already knows about Maria Callas and New York in the 1960s and the "besieged Sarajevo" of the present day. She doesn't understand Polish, but she picks up scraps of meaning from the conversations she hears, and she tells us something about herself. "For it should be mentioned, why not here, that all four of my grandparents were born in this country (hence, born in a country that had ceased to exist some 80 years earlier), indeed born around the very year to which I'd traveled in my mind in order to co-inhabit this room with its old-timed conversation" (*IA* 23). The narrator also tells us that she has "tried conjuring up a hotel dining room from the same era in Sarajevo, and failed," and more intimately that she firstly read *Middlemarch* at the age of 18 and cried "because I realized not only that I was Dorothea but that, a few months earlier, I had married Mr. Casaubon" (*IA* 24).

The narrator of *In America* clearly resembles Susan Sontag herself very much, considering the careful descriptions of her activities. Traveling in her mind, she tries to conjure up. The people she observes are not her countrymen; they are Polish aristocrats and artists and intellectuals, and there is a difference between a mental journey to a remembered place and the same journey to an imagined place, and still another difference between either of those trips and a journey to a place which is both actual and imagined, both documentable and dreamed. Salman Rushidie reminds his readers in *Midnight's Children* that reality can have a metaphorical content, on which Sontag's narrator comments shrewdly and melancholically: "The past is the biggest country of all, and there's a reason one gives into the desire to set stories in the past…I did not belong there, I was an alien presence…" (*IA* 23).

Evoked by this deferral of the American dream, Langston Hughes exclaims the epigraph to the whole novel: "America will be!" which sounds positive indeed, but can also be reduced to deep gloominess or even desperation if the future is for all time somewhere else. "America is supposed to repair the European scale of injury," Bogdan writes, "or simply make one forget what one wanted, to substitute other desires" (*IA* 209). The supposed repair seems a little distant, and just forgetting what one wanted isn't the most vibrant form of the American dream. "In America," Bogdan goes on to write in his diary, thinking of the tumbledown utopian community, "everything is supposed to be possible. And everything is possible here, abetted by the American inventiveness and the American talent for desecration. America lived up to its part of the bargain. The fault, the failure, is ours" (*IA* 225). What happens doesn't equal what's possible, in America or anywhere else, and the very idea of possibility may turn out to be a scathing reproach on the failing result.

Consequently, the American dream is nether repair for injury nor substitution of desire nor sheer slim possibility but something that can be persistently pursued for but hardly ever achieved. Early in the novel Maryna believes confidently in "the power of the will," insists on what she calls the "utopian" idea "that everything we wish can be obtained," following which she achieves a considerable number of successes. But gradually she comes to realize that maybe the will is "just another name for desire." In other words, there are two different types of will to be invoked. One is the planning, originating desire, seeking and finding means for its fulfillment. It is this type of will that gets Europeans to America, and gets them to achieve anything they want. The other one is much lonelier, powerless evocation of the will, which represents lingering desire without any hope or means of fulfillment, supposed to be capable of magically turning out thought into action, and unilaterally replacing all the fragments of desire. When people utter to "believe in the will," both senses of the word are in play. While describing Ryszard as "one of those extremely intelligent people who become writers because they cannot imagine a better use of their watchfulness," the narrator says something very similar about herself and her notion "that steadfastness and caring more than the others about what was important would take me wherever I wanted to go." "I thought if I listened and watched and ruminated, taking as much time as I needed, I could understand the people in this room, that theirs would be a story that would speak to me" (*IA* 26).

Above all there are two things to be noted in this novel. First, America is a place infiltrated with ideas, which keep intimidating to take the country out of place, and out of time, although it can't finally escape history's command. Second, the will is a fiction itself that moves many particulars around, which can't be ignored or believed in, either. The narrator finds these illuminating ideas in the large country of the past, which is easier to enter than to bring up to date. "I don't consider devotion to the past a form of snobbery," one of the characters says in a story in Sontag's *I, etcetera*. "Just one of the more disastrous forms of unrequited love" (*IE* 235). *In America* displays the same unrequited love, yet converting it into utopian, the place we can't go beyond and don't wish to leave.

Toward this alluring vision, Sontag suggests that we need both to understand its charm and to shake it off. It is not a style of radical will but rather the reverse: a longing for a historical time when wishing was an option, and for the fantasy time when wishing was enough.

As a writer who was an integral part of America's intellectual history, Sontag herself was reviewed like a monument, not simply the novel at hand. What Sontag loves most is an elevation of the "will and its capacity to transform the world" (Rollyson 180). Hence Sontag's fictions are often reviewed as a willed enterprise, that is, to confirm her own *willed* existence through her writings and discourse. Inspired by E. M. Cioran's advocation of a spiritual strenuousness that requires us to "sever our roots" and become "metaphysically foreigners," she embraces an idea of self-extrication from the world and from domestic commitments so as to experience life as "a series of situations" that leaves the consciousness free to explore its own labyrinth.

With a theme in common—the search for self-transcendence, the stories of *I, etcetera* carries on the writer's enterprise of trying to become a different or a better or a nobler or a more moral person. Concluded with a story that evokes the "great longing for another place. To make this place another," the book explains this search for an elsewhere might better define the self, with a significant image of travel as one feasible approach for search. It is why Sontag's narration in this book begins and ends with stories about travel. The location of "Unguided Tour" is declared by the narrator to be "as it were, everywhere" (*IE* 248). Sontag further explains this argument in her last novel *In America*: when Ryszard was on the ship, he "was nowhere; therefore he could feel he was everywhere, the king of consciousness. You pace your world, as it moves across a surface of unmarked sameness, from one end to the other. It's small, the world. You could put it in your pocket" (*IA* 116).

Sontag advocates an assertion of the will as she suggests that most of her characters were trying to wake up and to change their lives, which is a "theme in most of the stories." Sontag pointed it out to Wendy Lesser while also acknowledging something "desperate in all that talk about the will.

Again, it's something personal—I feel in many ways self-created, self-educated. There's some truth in that, but it's also part of that national cultural equipment. Americans have a tendency to overestimate the will—hence all those therapy groups, and endlessly renewable projects of self-reclamation, transformation, detoxification, rebirth, that Americans are so fond of." (qtd. in Rollyson 126)

With Sontag's autobiographical identification with her American roots and the Americanness exhibited in stories such as "Unguided Tour", *I, etcetera* received mixed reviews by the critic circle. As Sontag's most personal book, *I, etcetera* shows the writer's effort to search and to repair, through literature, the devastating losses in her life. America is presented as a world that muddles on in spite of its absurdity. Unable to cope with this world, the consciousness on an "unguided tour" and the I of "Project for a Trip to China" seeks to be somewhere else, while the story of "American Spirits" tends to satirize the American fondness of believing in a perfectible self, with a constant evocation of American prototypes of the will and self-improvement such as Ben Franklin and Tom Pain. Finding the anxiety about the self so prevalently American, Sontag intently makes this "American spirits" the subject for *I, etcetera*, attaching special importance to the all consuming project of becoming or maintaining or transforming the self. Energized by the idea of questing for a new self, Sontag carries out in her discourse a process of attaining and abandoning her own self as an American intellectual, what Sontag designates as "accumulation" and "disburdenment" (Rollyson 127).

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