



Sontag, Hell, Thinking, Politics

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Zeteo is Reading

December 2016

To designate a hell is not, of course, to tell us anything about how to extract people from that hell, how to moderate hell's flames. Still, it seems good in itself to acknowledge, to have enlarged, one's sense of how much suffering caused by human wickedness there is the world we share with others.

Someone who is perennially surprised that depravity exists, who continues to feel disillusioned (even incredulous) when confronted with evidence of what humans are capable of inflicting in the way of gruesome, hands-on cruelties upon other humans, has not reached moral or psychological adulthood. — Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*

Many editors and writers have been thinking that—as the Chernobyl nuclear disaster may give rise to new forms of life?—the disaster of the 2016 United States presidential election will lead to new kinds of writing.¹ The general ideal seems to be that *content* will be—should

¹ An example: *AGNI* Editor Sven Birkerts writing in his journal's **December 2016 newsletter**—

Suddenly, in what feels like an interval of unprecedented historical—and moral, and emotional—compression, everything has changed and, to use the cliché, all bets are off. There is so much to contemplate and on so many fronts.

On this small front—the writing life, the literary magazine—anxiety and outrage have brought with them an unexpected clarification. And with that, a very bracing rejuvenation of purpose. As Dickens wrote in *A Tale of Two Cities*, “There is prodigious strength in sorrow and despair.”

William Eaton is the Editor of *Zeteo*. A collection of his essays, ***Surviving the Twenty-First Century***, was published in 2015 by *Serving House Books*, 2015. A second volume, *Art, Sex, Politics*, is due out in 2017. He discusses Sontag's essay “Against Interpretation” in ***Wild Life, Wild Mind*** (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2013). Others of his pieces that discuss Ian Craib's *The Importance of Disappointment*: ***Living Life to the Fullest*** (Montaignebakhtinian, August 2013) and ***The King's Therapy*** (*Zeteo*, November 2012). Readers interested in quite other aspects of Eaton's work might see *Distancing / Awareness* (*Zeteo*, Fall 2014), which discusses Jean-Luc Godard's *Sympathy for the Devil* (or 1 + 1) and Alfred Kinsey's reports on sexuality; or ***Beyond Malcolm and Garnett: The Possibilities and Limitations of Translation*** (The Quarterly Conversation, December 2016).

be—different. As if to say, No more fooling around. Or no more musing, sophistication, post-modern literary games—and no more celebrity profiles? Factored somewhere in here must also be a larger development: how electronics have changed people’s reading habits, turning us into breathless skimmers, quickly plucking some possible gist before skipping, asap, to other posts. How—what?—does?—I write for such an audience (which includes me)?

Which is to say that the *style* of writing must change, too. At an extreme, post-election, this would be because fascist repression was so aggressive that it was no longer possible to speak directly. Like La Fontaine at the court of Louis XIV, it would be necessary to resort to analogy.

Sire, dit le Renard, vous êtes trop bon Roi ;
Sire, the fox said [to the lion], you are too good a king;
Vos scrupules font voir trop de délicatesse ;
Your scruples reveal too great a delicacy.
Eh bien, manger moutons, canaille, sottise espèce,
You know, eating sheep, the riff-raff, fools—
Est-ce un péché ? Non, non. Vous leur faites Seigneur
Is this a sin? No, no. You do them, My Lord,
En les croquant beaucoup d’honneur
In munching on them, a great deal of honor.²

Or, quite alternatively, there is the prose style that Donald Judd developed for talking about art in the early 1960s. “Most of the work in this show is different from [Claes] Oldenburg’s other work and is even better. It is some of the best work being done. . . . I think Oldenburg’s work is profound. I think it’s very hard to explain how.”³ And it is hard to

It’s hard to specify how these changes, both personal and collective, work. They can affect us unconsciously, in our responses and inclinations, long before they become personal precepts. Speaking for myself—in terms of reading and evaluating work for *AGNI*—I can already identify a new mind-state. But I don’t think it’s just me. All of us, whether readers, editors, or interns, feel it and talk about it. The barometer has plummeted and the pressure drop is marked in our gestures and expressions—in everyday conversation and also our talk about the work we read for the magazine.

² Jean de La Fontaine, **Les Animaux malades de la peste** (lines 41-47), the first fable of Book VII of La Fontaine’s, published in the second volume of the *Fables de La Fontaine*, 1678. The translation in the main text is my own and focuses on the wording. (Note that the French word “canaille,” here translated as riff-raff, comes from a Provençal word *canalha*, which meant a group of dogs.) A more poetic, nineteenth century translation by Elizur Wright, Jr. (**The Animals Sick of the Plague**) gives this:

Sire, said the fox, your majesty
Is humbler than a king should be,
And over-squeamish in the case.
What! eating stupid sheep a crime?
No, never, sire, at any time.
It rather was an act of grace,
A mark of honour to their race.

³ Donald Judd, review of Claes Oldenburg show at the Janis gallery, 1964; in *Complete Writings 1959-1975*, 133.

see any current use for mannered approaches, but, on the other hand, keeping things simple and getting straight to the point—why not?

In any case, changes in texts' content or style cannot be mandated, though they will be driven, half by the muses that guide and bewitch writers and half by writers' opportunistic responses to friends', editors', publishers', agents', and reviewers' evolving preferences. We may also feel confident that initial assessments of the “new writing” will give way to later, divergent ones. There was a time when Baby Boomers and Baby-Boom observers thought that the generation was being shaped by political protest, sexual liberation, and anti-conformism, and now we find that silicon chips and the increasing mobility of financial capital have played larger roles.

All this may come to seem an odd introduction to the paragraphs and footnotes that follow since, in both content and style, these are much like the work I was producing before the election. And yet, as I believe readers may appreciate, the present text is indeed a post-election work. For this reason: it is a product of how the election results, and my and others' post-election mood, affected my *reading* of a pre-election text. Specifically, read in late November, early December 2016, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag's second book on photography—published in 2003 as a kind of sequel to her highly successful 1977 *On Photography*—did not and could not seem to be about photography. This subject receded, while quite another—*homo homini lupus* (man is wolf to man)—came to the fore.

There may be those to say that my reading was less affected by the rise of neo-fascism and of the pro-slavery faction in the United States than it was by the heart-rending news from Aleppo.⁴ Fair enough. Pick your poison. And have our circumstances changes less than our focus, what we are now able to see? It may well be that there are some vital

⁴ The “pro-slavery” compound has emerged, in my brain, as a result of a 2015 *New Yorker* piece currently much on my mind. The piece is Nicholas Lemann's [**The Price of Union: The undefeatable South**](#), which suggests that not only has the Civil War never ended, the Southern side may be winning. A few extracts:

- A recent run of important historical studies have set themselves against the view of the antebellum South as a place apart, self-destructively devoted to its peculiar institution. Instead, they show, the South was essential to the development of global capitalism, and the rest of the country (along with much of the world) was deeply implicated in Southern slavery. Slavery was what made the United States an economic power. It also served as a malign innovation lab for influential new techniques in finance, management, and technology.
- [T]he passage of the Voting Rights Act was actually a North-South partnership, not an imposition of the North's will on the South. And it would be a big mistake to think of the act as a great, enduring civil-rights milestone, representing the country's belated decision to comply fully and everywhere with the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution. As Berman demonstrates, the act has been, instead, the subject of half a century of ceaseless contention, leaving its meaning permanently undetermined.

In the concluding paragraph, Lemann quotes from Lincoln's 1858 “House Divided” speech: “It will become all one thing or all the other.” Perhaps we have yet to really find out which one it (we, the United States of America) will become.

aspects of human existence and interdependence that we are coming to see more clearly, but this at the cost of losing sight of any number of other, more diverting phenomena.

Alles Ständische und Stehende verdampft, alles Heilige wird entweiht, und die Menschen sind endlich gezwungen, ihre Lebensstellung, ihre gegenseitigen Beziehungen mit nüchternen Augen anzusehen. (*Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei*—The Communist Manifesto: All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.)

The proverb *homo homini lupus* has been traced back through Freud and Hobbes to Plautus (c. 200 BC). In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, the specific idea, of our wolfishness, is implicit; Sontag states rather that, contrary to modern expectations and “modern ethical feeling, . . . War has been the norm and peace the exception.”⁵ (She is speaking of military conflict; were we to focus instead on class warfare, we could find moments of greater and lesser murderousness, but there is no peace.)

Freud, writing around 1930, as the first tidal wave of fascism began to appear, was more explicit:

[M]en are not gentle creatures, who want to be loved, who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbor is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him. *Homo homini lupus*. . . . In circumstances that are favorable to it, when the mental counter-forces which ordinarily inhibit it are out of action, it also manifests itself spontaneously and reveals man as a savage beast to whom consideration towards his own kind is something alien.⁶

⁵ One of the assertions of Sontag’s first chapter: war is “a man’s game . . . the killing machine has a gender, and it is male.” These words are connected to Virginia Woolf’s *Three Guineas* (1938), her reflections on the roots of war. In the first chapter, Sontag also cites Simone Weil’s classic essay, “L’Iliade ou le poème de la force,” written at the beginning of the Second World War and not long before Weil died in despair. The greatness of these several writers notwithstanding, and notwithstanding that men have historically been the warriors, and perhaps in this driven by their (our) higher levels of testosterone, etc.—I am not convinced that were women to rule the world, or even half of it, there would be less war. But this must be, as I’m sure it has been, a subject for other essays.

⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (Civilization and Its Discontents), as translated by James Strachey. First published 1930.

I must point out that when we speak of “man,” the category includes us, dear readers. It is more than a little unfortunate that *other* human beings are savage beasts, but the landscape explodes when we have the courage and clarity to accept that “I” am a savage beast, too.⁷ We didn’t need Freud to remind us of this; the Greeks bequeathed us how many myths, plays, and histories of internecine warfare and of competition and murder within families? But of course such things stop none of us from deciding that “I” and my family, my group, and my country, are exempt; we can only be some of the rare few who have suppressed or sublimated their savagery.

To this contention or decision, one could respond, Yeah, right, you’re the enlightened, gentle ones—until it’s a question of who is going to get the promotion, the sale, the helpful review, the larger share of the divorce settlement, the better preschool for her or his child, another country’s oil or manual labor at bargain basement prices.⁸ But such a response misses the greater aggressiveness in which we are, however ignorantly, involved. Sontag touches on this when she suggests that we “set aside the sympathy we extend to others beset by war and murderous politics for a reflection on how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may—in ways we might prefer not to imagine—be linked to their suffering as the wealth of some may imply the destitution of others.”

To put this another way, the complexity and alienation of modern life obscures from the relatively well off—and allows us to ignore—how many of the comforts we enjoy are the (bitter?) fruits of the brutal aggressiveness, not only of our ancestors, but also of corporations, government forces, and individuals active today. We might say that these groups and individuals have volunteered to do the killing and exploiting for us. And thus even as we enjoy our “privileges” (or our cheap oil, diamonds, coltan, water), we take pride in decrying the savagery of those—our mercenaries?—who are fighting the natural-resources-based wars in Syria, the Congo, Sudan, Mali . . . We would not have our sneakers or TVs be a whit more expensive, and we decry the working and living conditions of factory workers in the vast sweatshops of China and other, poorer countries.

Sontag notes that, although in the United States we have Holocaust museums, “there is no Museum of the History of Slavery—the whole story, starting with the slave trade in Africa itself, not just in selected parts, such as the Underground Railroad.” Nor, I would add,

⁷ While I was working on this section, the Rolling Stones’ old pop hit [Sympathy for the Devil](#) began to play in my head. Not surprisingly. Among the relevant lines, these from near the conclusion: “Tell me baby, what’s my name / I tell you one time, you’re to blame.”

⁸ During the 2016 US Presidential debates, Hillary Clinton liked to echo Michelle Obama’s line about how “when they go low, we go high,” but of course this was one of the ways Clinton had of going low or of signaling that she was about to “go low.” For this reason among others, I, though hardly a Trump supporter, did appreciate one set of comments he made during the debates. These comments involved him pointing out in various ways—e.g. as regards financial wheeling and dealing—that the pot was calling the kettle black.

is there a museum of the extermination of the American Indians, a sort of *Endlösung* (final solution) *avant la lettre*, and indeed a proceeding that inspired Hitler.⁹ Sontag writes:

To have a museum chronicling the great crime that was African slavery in the United States of America would be to acknowledge that the evil was *here*. Americans prefer to picture the evil that was *there*, and from which the United States—a unique nation, one without any certifiably wicked leaders throughout its entire history—is exempt.

Some years ago, in *The Importance of Disappointment*, the English sociologist become psychologist Ian Craib sought to locate appropriate psychological and political responses to the stark reality of our savagery. Craib proposes:

- Psychological integration involves becoming aware of and putting up with authentically bad aspects of relationships with other people, *and* of one's self; and
- Given human nature and the limitation on our capacity to change, the political question becomes less “How do [we] make our society a better place to live?” and more “How do we prevent our society becoming a worse place?”¹⁰

Augustine and his heirs and progenitors called (or made) the problem human corruption, original sin. Students of United States history can note how concerned James Madison and other framers of the Constitution were to make sure that it helped protect people from human weakness, viciousness certainly included. (Or did this supposed concern mask the real one: that in a democracy a wealthy minority risked being controlled by the more numerous poor and middle class? or by demagogues leveraging the power of these classes?) In any case, if we return to our epigraph and Sontag's point about the “perennially surprised that depravity exists” and about “moral or psychological adulthood,” we might say that somewhere betwixt the late eighteenth century and November 8, 2016, many

⁹ One might see John Toland, *Adolf Hitler*, 202:

Hitler's concept of concentration camps as well as the practicality of genocide owed much, so he claimed, to his studies of English and United States history. He admired the camps for Boer prisoners in South Africa and for the Indians in the Wild West; and often praised to his inner circle the efficiency of America's extermination—by starvation and uneven combat—of the red savages who could not be tamed by captivity.

Writing in the *Jewish Journal*, Lia Mandelbaum goes on:

[Hitler] was very interested in the way the Indian population had rapidly declined due to epidemics and starvation when the United States government forced them to live on the reservations. He thought the American government's forced migrations of the Indians over great distances to barren reservation land was a deliberate policy of extermination. Just how much Hitler took from the American example of the destruction of the Indian nations is hard to say; however, frightening parallels can be drawn. For some time Hitler considered deporting the Jews to a large 'reservation' in the Lubin area where their numbers would be reduced through starvation and disease.

¹⁰ Ian Craib, *The Importance of Disappointment*, 177 and 179.

Americans—thanks to advertising? mass media? electronic devices?—had lost their maturity, lost their capacity to see others and themselves clearly. During this return to immaturity we once again saw through a glass, darkly. Now we are coming to face to face with the terms of our existence, gaining a capacity not only to know others, but also ourselves?¹¹

I would append to the present set of quotations and observations (savage in their own way?), a few comments that may seem to head in quite another direction, but thereby make important corollary and somewhat warmer points. The main one, which this piece will land on more than once, is that, despite human savagery, corruption, viciousness, whathaveyou, some human beings have enjoyed the luxury of serious reading and rumination. Let us not lose track of what wonderful luxuries these activities are.

Sontag proposes:

There's nothing wrong with standing back and thinking. To paraphrase several sages: "Nobody can think and hit someone at the same time."¹²

I cannot quite agree with the first of the two sentences. If standing back and thinking becomes a way of trying to avoid the fray—the incessant class warfare, among other things—or if standing back and thinking becomes a way of pretending to be above the fray, it is in bad faith and ultimately destructive.¹³ This because bad faith cannot lead to good—I mean insightful—thoughts and because, if intellectuals do not fight for their class interests, then their numbers and privileges will, sooner or later, decline.

In his semi-fictional revisiting of the Spanish Civil War, *Soldados de Salamina* (2001), Javier Cercas has a character say "[A] mí me parece que un país civilizado es aquel en que uno no tiene necesidad de perder el tiempo con la política." (It seems to me that a civilized country is one in which one has no need to waste time on politics.)¹⁴ Sontag comes at this

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 13:12, King James Version: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known."

¹² I am not sure why Sontag writes "several," but certainly she is paraphrasing a famous line attributed to the baseball player Yogi Berra: "How can anybody think and hit at the same time." See [The Quote Investigator](#) for a discussion of the origins of this *bon mot*.

¹³ It is worth noting that Plato and his Academy buddies were the offspring of a defeated, humiliated political faction: the oligarchs. The Academicians' litero-philosophical activities—and my admiration for Plato's writing grows with each passing year—were a way of keeping themselves out of the political fray until the democratic faction stumbled or lost its mandate. Like the discussions at conservative US think tanks during the 1960s, some of these Greeks' ruminations were a way of exploring anti-democratic political ideas which might be implemented at a later date. (See *The Republic*.)

¹⁴ Like Camus in *La peste* (*The Plague*), Cercas explores the idea that a small band of warriors can defend civilization against the seemingly all-powerful forces of barbarousness. Cercas finds this idea in a phrase of Oswald Spengler's to this effect, and Cercas does this because Spengler's phrase was dear to *los falangistas*, the first small band of Spanish fascists. The ancient model is the outnumbered band of Greek warriors who, under Themistocles, in 480 BC in the Battle of Salamis, decisively fought off the Persian invaders. Nicely, in Cercas's text readers are offered more than one possible band of warriors quite besides *los falangistas*. His historical novel includes, for example, those who, even in the midst of savage civil war, did not lose their compassion, their

subject from another angle when she remarks that “nobody who really thinks about history can take politics altogether seriously.”¹⁵ But Cercas and Sontag were writing in another time—a dozen years ago already—and our thoughts are ever responses to our circumstances. Post-election, I do not see how we can see politics as a waste of time or not take it altogether seriously. By this I do not mean *only* that defeating the fascists will, as during the Second World War, require massive mobilization. I also mean that it is hard now not to see—or recognize—what a vital, warm (though at times too warm) part of life politics is. It is part of being a human being, of being engaged with others, and it may offer some a cure for the loneliness and narcissism from which many now suffer. As Camus writes of Dr. Rieux, the hero of his *Plague*:

Il avait seulement gagné d’avoir connu la peste et de s’en souvenir, d’avoir connu l’amitié et de s’en souvenir, de connaître la tendresse et de devoir un jour s’en souvenir. (A gloss: His only victory was to have known the plague and to be able to remember it, to have known friendship and to remember it, to know tenderness and having one day to remember it, too.)

Perhaps even with Trump in the White House and the Koch Brothers pouring their oily money into the crusade to eliminate Social Security, I will yet live long enough to finally

respect for individual lives. And there is a small band of soldiers who gave everything they had to defeat fascist forces in Africa. And there are writers. In her book, Sontag quotes from a letter Henry James sent the *New York Times* in March 1915, as part of an appeal for funds and volunteers to the American Ambulance Corps. James wrote: “One finds it in the midst of all this as hard to apply one’s words as to endure one’s thoughts. The war has used up words; they have weakened, they have deteriorated.” But in Cercas’s book—and with the help of one of its heroes, the Chilean writer and refugee Roberto Bolaño—words, conversation, stories—like a life-giving fountain—remain. I quote, quite out of context, from Montaigne: “que le gascon y arrive, si le français n’y peut aller!” Should fancy French fail us, may more vulgar Gascon words come to our rescue. (Montaigne, “De l’institution des enfants,” *Les essais*, tome I.)

¹⁵ I would first explicate Sontag’s remark in a Marxist, economic-determinist fashion. For example, Middle Eastern politics, about which so much is made, can be seen as a dance choreographed by the value currently placed on oil. Should that value change significantly, the political dance will follow along. Similarly, in “What Does Socialism Mean Today?”, reflections on the collapse of the Soviet Union, Jürgen Habermas wrote:

It is not as though the collapse of the Berlin Wall [i.e. a dramatic *political* event] has solved a single one of the problems specific to our system. The indifference of a market economy to its external costs, which it off-loads on to the social and natural environment, is sowing the path of a crisis-prone economic growth with the familiar disparities and marginalizations on the inside; with economic backwardness, if not regression, and consequently with barbaric living conditions, cultural expropriation, and catastrophic famines in the Third World; not to mention the worldwide risk caused by disrupting the balance of nature.

And then, thirdly, one could cite yet more fundamental forces, such as genetic ones. I have, for example, read that approximately 7,500 years ago, in a part of what is now Hungary, a genetic mutation occurred, allowing some number of humans to continue to be able to digest milk after the age of 8 or so. It has been proposed that the selective advantage of this single change may have helped the beneficiaries to take over Europe and establish a new way of life. In this case, the politics these people engaged in pales in significance when compared to their genetic endowment. (For more, see “The Milk Revolution: When a single genetic mutation first let ancient Europeans drink milk, it set the stage for a continental upheaval,” by Andrew Curry, *Nature*.)

complete an essay on Camus's novel which I began many years ago. The heart of the graying draft remains this:

One little noted difference between Doctor Rieux and his band and most of the other residents of the plague-infected city of Oran is that the first grouping are portrayed as having more fun. Through their commitment to fight for the survival of their community and of people they do not know, they find a rare companionship and a rare capacity for companionship. Striking, too, is how long their days are. After working like dogs dealing with the dead and dying and the government bureaucracy they still have time for long philosophical discussions, a dip in the sea. It is as if, because of their commitment, time for them is suspended or slowed down, their lives are larger than those of we ordinary mortals, focused as we are on our families, possessions, personal tastes, and private goals.

And yet (and finally), all this championing of political engagement also highlights, by contrast, a point made implicitly by Sontag's writing and thinking, and by the book of it (*Regarding . . .*) that editors and designers helped her make. This point is, again: the opportunity and capacity to engage in serious reading and rumination are a great and wonderful luxury.¹⁶

¹⁶ *Regarding . . .* might be said to come with a bonus: it was **reviewed in *The New Republic*** by the great Bulgarian-French writer Tzvetan Todorov (his French translated by Claire Messud). However, while the review bears some fruit, one has the sense that neither Sontag's text nor the task of reviewing it inspired Todorov. Aspects of Sontag's book that pleased me seemed to fall flat with him. "[S]mall and rather digressive . . . One sometimes has the impression of a long fireside conversation from which we have only the contributions of one participant."

The best passages in Todorov's review reveal that he shares Sontag's preference for words over photographs. (*Regarding* comes with no images besides the one used for the cover.) Todorov writes:

Sentences have a subject and a predicate, a part that delimits what is being discussed and another part that says something about it. But images are subjects without predicates: they evoke the world intensely, but they do not tell us, of themselves, what we should think about it . . .

Is it that, unlike words, but also unlike painted pictures, [photographs] present us with an authentic piece of reality and lead us, by this shortcut, directly to the truth? Clearly not. . . . What is decisive is the choice to photograph this and not that. "It is always the image that someone chose," Sontag observes; "to photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude." For this reason, photography is as subjective as drawing or narrative—even if it has a less determined meaning than the latter. The specificity of the photographic image lies elsewhere: not in the greatest fidelity to the exterior world, but in the physical continuity between the object represented and the subject taking the picture. That is why we experience a certain discomfort when the scene photographed is particularly violent: looking at images of lynchings and executions, one wonders whether the photographer, rather than seeking a better angle for his photograph, ought not to have thrown himself upon the torturers in an effort to disarm them.

Sontag also writes: "A narrative seems likely to be more effective than an image. Partly it is a question of the length of time one is obliged to look, to feel."

The contents of Sontag's book are so horrible—

On the first day of the Battle of the Somme, July 1, 1916, sixty thousand British soldiers were killed or gravely wounded—thirty thousand of these in the first half-hour.

American television viewers weren't allowed to see footage acquired by NBC (which the network then declined to run) of . . . the fate of thousands of Iraqi conscripts who, having fled Kuwait City at the end of the [Gulf War, 1991], were carpet bombed with explosives, napalm, radioactive DU (depleted uranium) rounds, and cluster bombs as they headed north . . . on the road to Bara, Iraq—a slaughter notoriously depicted by one American officer as a “turkey shoot.”

. . . the total extermination of the Herero people in Namibia decreed by the German colonial administration in 1904; the Japanese . . . massacre of nearly four hundred thousand, and the rape of eighty thousand, Chinese in December 1937 . . . ; the rape of some one hundred and thirty thousand women and girls (ten thousand of whom committed suicide) by victorious Soviet soldiers unleashed by their commanding officers in Berlin in 1945 . . .

And yet there is something so “civilized,” if you will, something so pleasurable in Sontag's book, and notwithstanding how dispiriting and unpleasant its bits of history are. From whence does this civilization and pleasure spring? The slimness of the volume; a sense of breathing room offered by the ample leading between the lines of type and by the fact that there are only about 8 words per line, 200 per page. In part because she is Sontag, but mainly because she is of an older, pre-post-modern generation, Sontag also offers the comfort of absolute truths. She can tell us that 1945 was the year photographs' power “to define the most abominable realities trumped all the complex narratives” and that “photography is the only major art in which . . .” And my heart has a soft spot for lines such as the following, from *Regarding's* Acknowledgments:

For information about Roger Fenton [one of the first war photographers], I am indebted to Nathalie M. Houston, “Reading the Victorian Souvenir: Sonnets and Photographs of the Crimean War,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 14, no. 2 (Fall 2001).

I continue to learn, as I have for many years, from conversations with Ivan Nagel. [A Hungarian-German theater scholar and director.]

Much as, say, Plato's *Gorgias*, these lines speak of a life of the mind, a life that currently seems in peril.¹⁷

Image

Francisco Goya, "Y no hai remedio" (It can't be helped), number 15 of *Los desastres de la Guerra* (The Disasters of War), a series of 80 aquatint prints created by Francisco Goya in the 1810s. In the collection of el Museo del Prado, Madrid.

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Donald Judd, review of Claes Oldenburg show at the Janis gallery, as published in "In the Galleries," *Arts Magazine*, September 1964. Reprinted in Donald Judd, *Complete Writings 1959-1975* (Judd Foundation, 2015), 133.

¹⁷ See again, however, footnote 11 regarding Plato's Academy. And, thus, see Craib on what psychological integration involves—e.g. awareness and acceptance of conflicts and thus a "necessary disappointment." (*The Importance of Disappointment*, 38-39 and 177.)

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