

century tediums" with erudition and artifice: most unfashionable of all! The most novel feature of his new volume, which also contains excellent examples of the poems about myth, legend and learning we have come to expect of him, is his affectionately acknowledged (and unacknowledged) debts to other poets. There is a small series of tributes to dead writers (Eliot, Vernon Watkins, Brian Higgins, Maurice Carpenter), a joyful pastiche of Charles Causley—and some startling moments of the Ewart- and Auden-esque, as in his opening jubilee poem:

*Economics, the law of the household, decrees
Dame Parsimony, the hard-faced lady cook
Should have a finger in our festive pie, and yet
Let the silver trumpets of jubilee sound forth
Throughout the length and breadth of the land,
to authorize
Judicious binge and beano. . . .*

This is his first book since the mock-epic *Artorius*: he is writing with ever-increasing humour and range in what he once, too self-disparagingly, labelled his "classical-romantic manner."

Images of the Instant Past

Sontag on Photography—By ROBERT MELVILLE

THE TAILPIECE of Susan Sontag's collected essays on the nature of the photographic image¹ is a brief anthology of quotations which she has captioned "Homage to W.B." Walter Benjamin is quoted twice in the anthology and there are several references to him in the essays. She is fascinated by his belief that he could have created a work of literary criticism consisting entirely of quotations, and she thinks they would not have been chosen to prove a case because his Surrealist sensibility would have lent ambivalence to his Marxist principles: like photographic images of the instant past, they could only have been an accumulation of oddities, but would have been greatly superior to the average collection of photographs. Her admiration for Benjamin is boundless; her admiration for photographers is mingled with contempt.

Her own little anthology is a surrealistic demonstration of the art of juxtaposition, a St Vitus's dance of modest, ambitious and absurd claims for photography interspersed with advertisements for cameras so simple to use that anyone can obtain instant results of high technical quality. The outcome is an effect of ironic neutrality. Her essays on the other hand are analytical, paradoxical, controversial, always clever, often profound—and the outcome is an effect of ironic neutrality.

One of her quotations from Benjamin evokes photographs by Atget:

It has quite justly been said of Atget that he photographed [deserted Paris streets] like scenes of crime. The scene of a crime too is deserted; it is photographed for the purpose of establishing evidence. . . .

¹ *On Photography*. By SUSAN SONTAG. Allen Lane, £5.50.

Atget's streets remind one of the deliberately commonplace photographs of Paris streets used by Breton to illustrate his Surrealist novel *Nadja*: like them, they are without positive hue, grey and neutral yet with a touch of mystery and melancholy. But there is a fictive account of an attempt to use a photograph as evidence of a crime in Antonioni's colour film *Blowup* in which the greenery and dismal light of a deserted park create the same sense of greyness as Atget's streets; also the film sequence in the park beautifully fits Sontag's description of the typical photographer as "an armed version of the solitary walker, reconnoitering, stalking . . . the voyeuristic stroller." A fashion photographer is taking an early morning walk in the park. Suddenly he sees in the distance a man dragging another figure into the bushes with a woman looking on. He takes a photograph but the scene is too far away, the figures are not identifiable. He becomes obsessive, convinced that the photograph knows more than it is telling him, and that by making larger and larger blowups he will force it to yield up what it is trying to conceal. It is a charming play on the deeply rooted belief that the camera cannot lie.

Sontag refers to a different sequence in *Blowup*. The photographer is sitting astride the thighs of a fashion model lying on the floor. He is madly clicking his camera at her face while she turns this way and that. The scene is a substitute for a paroxysmal rape. At the same time, Antonioni is poking fun at the kind of photographer who, instead of posing the model, treats her as a moving target and spends roll after roll of film in the hope of getting at least one startling but natural picture—to borrow a phrase once used by Sontag in another context, it's a "revolt against calculation", and incidentally supports one of her

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quotes from W.B.: "There is an ever-growing compulsion to reproduce the object photographically, in close-up." But Sontag cites this sequence from *Blowup* as evidence that the camera is a poor symbol for the penis, and finds the gun and the fast car more suitable analogies for the camera as a weapon. She quotes from a camera ad ("Just aim, focus and shoot") to prove that the camera is sold as a predatory weapon, but admits that it seems to be all bluff, "like a man's fantasy of having a gun, knife or tool between his legs", but since a man no more fantasises about having a car between his legs than having a camera there the symbolism gets a bit complicated.

All the same, she insists, the photographer is a predatory animal:

To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have, it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as the camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a sublimated murder—a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time.

In the late 19th century, Mrs Cameron was daringly planting her tripod somewhat closer to the model than most photographers, risking a charge of undignified conduct in the hope of capturing all the beauty she could see in a face. It would never have occurred to her to get so close that the lens might find skin textures and blemishes invisible to the naked eye. (Any blemishes in her photographs were due to her mishandling of the wet collodion process, but some of her disasters in the dark room were fascinating; they could drench a face in tears or put madness into the eyes.) Since then, as W.B. wrote, "there has been an ever-growing compulsion" to push the lens closer to the object. I shall never forget the first big close-up I saw in a silent film. I was about twelve at the time. The screen was filled by a girl's face, too huge and overpowering to be human. I was in the front row, and the pores of her skin were like wire-netting. I wanted to back away.

SONTAG IS PROBABLY RIGHT to say that "photographs shock in so far as they show something novel." She is talking about the proliferation of atrocity images and suggesting that it's only one's "first encounter with the photographic inventory of ultimate horror" that retains the force of revelation. It's perhaps emblematic of the way photography has developed that Sontag at the age of twelve in July

1945 and that I in the same year, but very much older, both had our first encounter with ultimate horror in the photographs of Belsen and Dachau. "What good was served by seeing them?" she asks. She doesn't exactly answer, but "something went dead, something is still crying."

The cameraman's compulsion to get in close is not confined to the human face: the back of the head and every other part of the body have become good subjects. The soft murder has become a soft dismemberment, and Sontag uses another of Antonioni's films, his documentary on China, to focus on the fragmentation of the human image in the West and the highly critical response of a people whose ideology ties its photography to the "family group" convention. For instance, Antonioni's sequence in the square in Peking, where the Chinese on political pilgrimage gather, was practically limited to shots of the pilgrims waiting to be photographed. According to his Chinese critics, the desire of the masses to be photographed in Tien An Men Square

is a reflection of their deep revolutionary feelings. But with bad intentions, Antonioni, instead of showing this reality, took shots only of people's clothing, movement and expressions: here, someone's ruffled hair; there, people peering, their eyes dazzled by the sun: one moment their sleeves; another, their trousers. . . .

In the West, we have not by any means dropped the convention of the family group, and at weddings it has now become the most important part of the ceremony. If it's a church wedding in England it's as essential that the church porch is visible in the background as it is that the visiting Chinese are unmistakably grouped in Tien An Men Square. When the American photographer Elliot Erwitt was asked (in *Interviews with Master Photographers*, published by Paddington Press) if he ever felt that his presence as a photographer influenced the event, he mentioned that he had had an assignment to photograph weddings all over the country for a love issue of *Life*:

I was appalled—they would have had the weddings on their heads if it was useful to your photography. I once had some people stand in a particular position that was more convenient for me so that when they released the rose petals at the end of the ceremony they all fell in the wrong place.

I recently saw an album of photographs devoted to one working-class wedding which confirms Sontag's observation that the popularity of photographs is "ultimately an affirma-

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tion of kitsch." The members of the wedding were photographed in so many different groupings that there were about twenty large colour photographs. They were fastened between padded covers bound in white kid, and when the album was opened it played *The Wedding March*.

ANY ATTEMPT to have included illustrations in Sontag's book would have been too selective. Out of the countless millions of photographs already taken and on the increase every moment of every day and night there is not one that does not have a claim to be reproduced, if only because when the word "all" appears in her generalisations, she seems to mean "all." "Photography", she writes, "democratises all experiences... all photographs promote nostalgia, all photographs are *memento mori*", and the unwritten "all" is no less certainly meant when she writes "a photograph is both pseudo-presence and a token of absence."

She has allowed the publisher to reproduce one photograph on the dust-cover. It is a Daguerreotype of 1850, by an unknown photographer, of another unknown photographer and his assistant displaying a dim photograph of a family group, a mother with her three children, the youngest seated on her lap. With a few minor changes it

could be the first family group that included myself. My mother had answered the knock of an itinerant photographer. She put on her best hat because we were to be "taken" outdoors, in a row between the mean little gate posts to show that the front door didn't open straight on to the street. I was young enough to be held by her, but it was a tight squeeze to get the other two in line beside her. Then the photographer opened his shutter at the very moment I flung out my arm and knocked my mother's hat sideways. We all look sort of crushed. I hated it when I was older. I felt almost as guilty as the photographer for its perpetration; it not only showed my mother's hat all askew, but registered her distraught expression.

One of Sontag's essays includes a powerful account of the work of Diane Arbus. It is probably an extended or re-written version of a review of the Arbus retrospective held at the Museum of Modern Art in 1972, the year after her suicide. I saw the exhibition when it was put on in London. The exhibits were terrifyingly obvious examples of the photograph as soft murder. I happen to recall one of a plump, placid couple in late middle-age sitting opposite one another in comfortable armchairs in their neat, homely "lounge." The scene is the epitome of domesticity except that the couple is stark naked. It makes it hard for me to accept Sontag's assertion that all photographs beautify.

Arbus found her social misfits, genetic freaks and sexual deviates in nudist camps, drag balls, fairs and mental hospitals, and if there was a terrible sameness about her work it was partly because she gave her camera the power "to insinuate anguish, kinkiness, mental illness" into photographs of ordinary people. She was born into the Jewish upper-middle class and was by profession a fashion photographer, but wrote that she suffered from never having felt adversity. She sought to live dangerously by finding her way into the lower depths and making friends with some of its natives in much the same spirit as those Victorian ladies who went exploring alone in darkest Africa, armed with an umbrella instead of a camera. By winning the confidence of some of these social pariahs, Arbus was able to photograph them in the full frontal formal poses which they themselves considered would show them at their dignified best, and which, in fact, exaggerated their repulsiveness. But the umbrella was a better defence than the camera and after what Sontag calls her season in hell, Arbus can be said to have died of psychic wounds.

PLACING HER PIECE ON Arbus so that it would be immediately followed by her most provocative

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statement was good strategy by Sontag, and it is with evident glee that she announces that photography “has managed to carry out the grandiose, century-old threats of a Surrealist takeover of the modern sensibility, while most of the pedigreed candidates have dropped out of the race.”

I think we have to remember at this point that Sontag was growing up at a time when Abstract Expressionism was having its greatest triumphs. To a sensitive young American the “revolt against calculation” was what 20th-century painting was all about. The “pedigreed candidates” she mentions were the members of the Surrealist Group in Paris. The Surrealist painters had *their* great time in the 1930s and '40s. Almost

all of them are dead, and it is a long while since any of them hoped to change the world. What Sontag has against them is that they were *figurative*, and she finds the idea of figurative painting in the 20th century so contemptible that she casts around for an insult and calls the paintings “mostly wet dreams”, not a well-considered phrase from someone who admires Pollock’s drip paintings. It must be quite confusing to have to argue, however cleverly, that nothing could be more surreal than a photograph “which virtually produces itself and with a minimum of effort”, and at the same time be aware that André Breton’s famous definition of Surrealism—“pure psychic automatism”—fits some of Pollock’s paintings like a glove.

Official Portrait

O, but you should have seen him on the day! . . .
Such robes, so debonair,
And such assurance!
He looked a picture.

Well, he has been one,
Paid for, exhibited, and hung
Where an Old Master ought to hang,
Above his hearth,
An oiled celebrity
These twenty years.

And now they take him down to clean him,
And find what’s often found behind a picture:
A blank; a wall,
Shielded against dust,
Never exposed to light,
That might look whiter than the wall surrounding,
But for those rat’s-tails of grey fluff,
Old cobwebs, damp, and other blemishes.

Are these a truth about him
The picture tried to hide?
O how did the face look,
And the wall, how did the wall,
The night he turned to it,
Who has turned back in oils,
So smiled, and seemed so confident,
These twenty years,
Above the fireplace that he used to block?

Michael Burn