Literature is freedom

The *Friedenspreis* acceptance speech

by Susan Sontag

President Johannes Rau, Minister of the Interior Otto Schily, State Minister of Culture Christina Weiss, the Lord Mayor of Frankfurt Petra Roth, Vice-President of the Bundestag Antje Vollmer, your excellencies, other distinguished guests, honored colleagues, friends . . . among them, dear Ivan Nagel:

To speak in the Paulskirche, before this audience, to receive the prize awarded in the last fifty-three years by the German Book Trade to so many writers, thinkers, and exemplary public figures whom I admire—to speak in this history-charged place and on this occasion, is a humbling and inspiring experience. I can only the more regret the deliberate absence of the American ambassador, Mr. Daniel Coats, whose immediate refusal, in June, of the invitation from the Booksellers Association, when this year's Friedenspreis was announced, to attend our gathering here today, shows he is more interested in affirming the ideological stance and the rancorous reactiveness of the Bush administration than he is, by fulfilling a normal diplomatic duty, in representing the interests and reputation of his—and my—country.

Ambassador Coats has chosen not to be here, I assume, because of criticisms I have voiced, in newspaper and television interviews and in brief magazine articles, of the new radical bent of American foreign policy, as exemplified by the invasion and occupation of Iraq. He should be here, I think, because a citizen of the country he represents in Germany has been honored with an important German prize.

An American ambassador has the duty to represent his country, all of it. I, of course, do not represent America, not even that substantial minority that does not support the imperial program of Mr. Bush and his advisors. I like to think I do not represent anything but literature, a certain idea of literature, and conscience, a certain idea of conscience or duty. But, mindful of the citation for this prize from a major European country, which mentions my role as an "intellectual ambassador" between the two continents (ambassador, needless to say, in the weakest, merely metaphorical sense), I cannot resist offering a few thoughts about the renowned gap between Europe and the United States, which my interests and enthusiasms purportedly bridge.

First, is it a gap—which continues to be bridged? Or is it not also a conflict? Irate, dismissive statements about Europe, certain European countries, are now the common coin of American political rhetoric; and here, at least in the rich countries on the western side of the continent, anti-American sentiments are more common, more audible, more intemperate than ever. What is this conflict? Does it have deep roots? I think it does.

There has always been a latent antagonism between Europe and America, one at least as complex and ambivalent as that between parent and child. America is a neo-European country and, until the last few decades, was largely populated by European peoples. And yet it is always the differences between Europe and America that have struck the most perceptive European observers: Alexis de Tocqueville, who visited the young nation in 1831 and returned to France to write *Democracy in America*, still, some hundred and seventy years later, the best book about my country, and D.H. Lawrence, who, eighty years ago, published the most interesting book ever written about American culture, his influential, exasperating *Studies in Classic American Literature*, both understood that America, the child of Europe, was becoming, or had become, the antithesis of Europe.

Rome and Athens. Mars and Venus. The authors of recent popular tracts promoting the idea of an inevitable clash of interests and values between Europe and America did not invent these antitheses. Foreigners brooded over them—and they provide the palette, the recurrent melody, in much of American literature throughout the 19th century,

from James Fenimore Cooper and Ralph Waldo Emerson to Walt Whitman, Henry James, William Dean Howells, and Mark Twain. American innocence and European sophistication; American pragmatism and European intellectualizing; American energy and European world-weariness; American naïveté and European cynicism; American goodheartedness and European malice; American moralism and the European arts of compromise—you know the tunes.

You can choreograph them differently; indeed, they have been danced with every kind of evaluation or tilt for two tumultuous centuries. Europhiles can use the venerable antitheses to identify America with commerce-driven barbarism and Europe with high culture, while the Europhobes draw on a ready-made view in which America stands for idealism and openness and democracy and Europe a debilitating, snobbish refinement. Tocqueville and Lawrence observed something fiercer: not just a declaration of independence from Europe, and European values, but a steady undermining, an assassination of European values and European power. "You can never have a new thing without breaking an old," Lawrence wrote. "Europe happened to be the old thing. America should be the new thing. The new thing is the death of the old." America, Lawrence divined, was on a Europe-destroying mission, using democracy—particularly cultural democracy, democracy of manners—as an instrument. And when that task is accomplished, he went on, America might well turn from democracy to something else. (What that might be is, perhaps, emerging now.)

Bear with me if my references have been exclusively literary. After all, one function of literature—of important literature, of necessary literature—is to be prophetic. What we have here, writ large, is the perennial literary—or cultural—quarrel: between the ancients and the moderns.

The past is (or was) Europe, and America was founded on the idea of breaking with the past, which is viewed as encumbering, stultifying, and—in its forms of deference and precedence, its standards of what is superior and what is best—fundamentally undemocratic, or "elitist," the reigning current synonym. Those who speak for a triumphal America continue to intimate that American democracy implies repudiating Europe, and, yes, embracing a certain liberating, salutary barbarism. If, today, Europe is regarded by most Americans as more socialist than elitist, that still makes Europe, by American standards, a retrograde continent, obstinately attached to old standards: the welfare state. "Make it new" is not only a slogan for culture; it describes an ever-advancing, world-encompassing economic machine.

However, if necessary, even the "old" can be rebaptized as the "new."

It is not a coincidence that the strong-minded American Secretary of Defense tried to drive a wedge within Europe—distinguishing unforgettably between an "old" Europe (bad) and a "new" Europe (good). How did Germany, France, and Belgium come to be consigned to "old" Europe, while Spain, Italy, Poland, Ukraine, The Netherlands, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Bulgaria find themselves part of "new" Europe? Answer: to support the United States in its present extensions of political and military power is, by definition, to pass into the more desirable category of the "new." Whoever is with us is "new."

All modern wars, even when their aims are the traditional ones, such as territorial aggrandizement or the acquisition of scarce resources, are cast as clashes of civilizations—culture wars—with each side claiming the high ground, and characterizing the other as barbaric. The enemy is invariably a threat to "our way of life," an infidel, a desecrator, a polluter, a defiler of higher or better values. The current war against the very real threat posed by militant Islamic fundamentalism is a particularly clear example. What is worth remarking is that a milder version of the same terms of disparagement underlies the antagonism between Europe and America. It should also be remembered that, historically, the most virulent anti-American rhetoric ever heard in Europe—consisting essentially in the charge that Americans are barbarians—came not from the so-called left but from

the extreme right. Both Hitler and Franco repeatedly inveighed against an America (and a world Jewry) engaged in polluting European civilization with its base, business values.

Of course, much of European public opinion continues to admire American energy, the American version of "the modern." And, to be sure, there have always been American fellow-travelers of the European cultural ideals (one stands here before you), who find in the old arts of Europe correction and a liberation from the strenuous mercantilist biases of American culture. And there have always been the counterparts of such Americans on the European side: Europeans who are fascinated, enthralled, profoundly attracted to the United States, precisely because of its difference from Europe.

What the Americans see is almost the reverse of the Europhile cliché: they see themselves defending civilization. The barbarian hordes are no longer outside the gates. They are within, in every prosperous city, plotting havoc. The "chocolate-producing" countries (France, Germany, Belgium) will have to stand aside, while a country with "will"—and God on its side—pursues the battle against terrorism (now conflated with barbarism). According to Secretary of State Powell, it is ridiculous for old Europe (sometimes it seems only France is meant) to aspire to play a role in governing or administering the territories won by the coalition of the conqueror. It has neither the military resources nor the taste for violence nor the support of its cosseted, all-too-pacific populations. And the Americans have it right. Europeans are not in an evangelical—or a bellicose—mood.

Indeed, sometimes I have to pinch myself to be sure I am not dreaming: that what many people in my own country now hold against Germany, which wreaked such horrors on the world for nearly a century—the new "German problem," as it were—is that Germans are repelled by war; that much of German public opinion is now virtually . . . pacifist!

Were America and Europe never partners, never friends? Of course. But perhaps it is true that the periods of unity—of common feeling—have been exceptions, rather than the rule. One such time was from the Second World War through the early Cold War, when Europeans were profoundly grateful for America's intervention, succor, and support. Americans are comfortable seeing themselves in the role of Europe's savior. But then, America will expect the Europeans to be forever grateful, which is not what Europeans are feeling right now.

From "old" Europe's point of view, America seems bent on squandering the admiration—and gratitude—felt by most Europeans. The immense sympathy for the United States in the aftermath of the attack on September 11, 2001 was genuine. (I can testify to its resounding ardor and sincerity in Germany; I was in Berlin at the time.) But what has followed is an increasing estrangement on both sides.

The citizens of the richest and most powerful nation in history have to know that America is loved, and envied . . . and resented. More than a few who travel abroad know that Americans are regarded as crude, boorish, uncultivated by many Europeans, and don't hesitate to match these expectations with behavior that suggests the *ressentiment* of the ex-colonials. And some of the cultivated Europeans who seem most to enjoy visiting or living in the United States attribute to it, condescendingly, the liberating ambiance of a colony where one can throw off the restrictions and high-culture burdens of "back home." I recall being told by a German film-maker, living at the time in San Francisco, that he loved being in the States "because you don't have any culture here." For more than a few Europeans, including, it should be mentioned, D.H. Lawrence ("there the life comes up from the roots, crude but vital," he wrote to a friend in 1915, when he was making plans to live in America), America was the great escape. And vice versa: Europe was the great escape for generations of Americans seeking "culture." Of course, I am speaking only of minorities here, minorities of the privileged.

So America now sees itself as the defender of civilization and Europe's savior, and wonders why Europeans don't get the point; and Europeans see America as a reckless warrior state—a description that the Americans return by seeing Europe as the enemy of

America: only pretending, so runs rhetoric heard increasingly in the United States, to be pacifist, in order to contribute to the weakening of American power. France in particular is thought to be scheming to become America's equal, even its superior, in shaping world affairs—"Operation America Must Fail" is the name invented by a columnist in the *New York Times* to describe the French drive toward dominance—instead of realizing that an American defeat in Iraq will encourage "radical Muslim groups—from Baghdad to the Muslim slums of Paris" to pursue their jihad against tolerance and democracy.

It is hard for people not to see the world in polarizing terms ("them" and us") and these terms have in the past strengthened the isolationist theme in American foreign policy as much as they now strengthen the imperialist theme. Americans have got used to thinking of the world in terms of enemies. Enemies are somewhere else, as the fighting is almost always "over there," with Islamic fundamentalism now replacing Russian and Chinese communism as the implacable, furtive menace to "our way of life." And terrorist is a more flexible word than communist. It can unify a larger number of quite different struggles and interests. What this may mean is that the war will be endless—since there will always be some terrorism (as there will always be poverty and cancer); that is, there will always be asymmetrical conflicts in which the weaker side uses that form of violence, which usually targets civilians. American rhetoric, if not the popular mood, would support this unhappy prospect, for the struggle for righteousness never ends.

It is the genius of the United States, a profoundly conservative country in ways that Europeans find difficult to fathom, to have devised a form of conservative thinking that celebrates the new rather than the old. But this is also to say, that in the very ways in which the United States seems extremely conservative—for example, the extraordinary power of the consensus and the passivity and conformism of public opinion (as Tocqueville remarked in 1831) and the media—it is also radical, even revolutionary, in ways that Europeans find equally difficult to fathom.

Part of the puzzle, surely, lies in the disconnect between official rhetoric and lived realities. Americans are constantly extolling "traditions"; litanies to family values are at the center of every politician's discourse. And yet the culture of America is extremely corrosive of family life, indeed of all traditions except those redefined as "identities" that can be accepted as part of larger patterns of distinctiveness, cooperation, and openness to innovation.

Perhaps the most important source of the new (and not so new) American radicalism is what used to be viewed as a source of conservative values: namely, religion. Many commentators have noted that perhaps the biggest difference between the United States and most European countries (old as well as new according to current American distinction) is that in the United States religion still plays a central role in society and public language. But this is religion American style: more the idea of religion than religion itself.

True, when, during George Bush's run for president in 2000, a journalist was inspired to ask the candidate to name his "favorite philosopher," the well-received answer—one that would make a candidate for high office from any centrist party here in any European country a laughing stock—was "Jesus Christ." But, of course, Bush didn't mean, and was not understood to mean, that, if elected, his administration would actually feel bound by any of the precepts or social programs expounded by Jesus.

The United States is a generically religious society. That is, in the United States it's not important which religion you adhere to, as long as you have one. To have a ruling religion, even a theocracy, that would be just Christian (or a particular Christian denomination) would be impossible. Religion in America must be a matter of choice. This modern, relatively contentless idea of religion, constructed along the lines of consumerist choice, is the basis of American conformism, self-righteousness, and moralism (which Europeans often mistake, condescendingly, for Puritanism). Whatever

historic faiths the different American religious entities purport to represent, they all preach something similar: reform of personal behavior, the value of success, community cooperativeness, tolerance of other's choices. (All virtues that further and smooth the functioning of consumer capitalism.) The very fact of being religious ensures respectability, promotes order, and gives the guarantee of virtuous intentions to the mission of the United States to lead the world.

What is being spread—whether it is called democracy, or freedom, or civilization—is part of a work in progress, as well as the essence of progress itself. Nowhere in the world does the Enlightenment dream of progress have such a fertile setting as it does in America.

Demystifying Polarities

Are we then really so separate? How odd that, at a moment when Europe and America have never been so similar culturally, there has never been such a great divide.

Still, for all the similarities in the daily lives of citizens in rich European countries and the daily lives of Americans, the gap between the European and the American experience is a genuine one, founded on important differences of history, of notions of the role of culture, of real and imagined memories. The antagonism—for there is antagonism—is not to be resolved in the immediate future, for all the good will of many people on both sides of the Atlantic. And yet one can only deplore those who want to maximize those differences, when we do have so much in common.

The dominance of America is a fact. But America, as the present administration is starting to see, cannot do everything alone. The future of our world—the world we share—is syncretistic, impure. We are not shut off from each other. More and more, we leak into each other.

In the end, the model for whatever understanding—conciliation—we might reach lies in thinking more about that venerable opposition, "old" and "new." The opposition between "civilization" and "barbarism" is essentially stipulatory; it is corrupting to think about and pontificate about—however much it may reflect certain undeniable realities. But the opposition of "old" and "new" is genuine, ineradicable, at the center of what we understand to be experience itself.

"Old" and "new" are the perennial poles of all feeling and sense of orientation in the world. We cannot do without the old, because in what is old is invested all our past, our wisdom, our memories, our sadness, our sense of realism. We cannot do without faith in the new, because in what is new is invested all our energy, our capacity for optimism, our blind biological yearning, our ability to forget—the healing ability that makes reconciliation possible.

The inner life tends to mistrust the new. A strongly developed inner life will be particularly resistant to the new. We are told we must choose—the old or the new. In fact, we must choose both. What is a life if not a series of negotiations between the old and the new? It seems to me that one should always be seeking to talk oneself out of these stark oppositions.

Old versus new, nature versus culture—perhaps it is inevitable that the great myths of our cultural life be played out as geography, not only as history. Still, they are myths, clichés, stereotypes, no more; the realities are much more complex.

A good deal of my life has been devoted to trying to demystify ways of thinking that polarize and oppose. Translated into politics, this means favoring what is pluralistic and secular. Like some Americans and many Europeans, I would far prefer to live in a multilateral world—a world not dominated by any one country (including my own). I could express my support, in a century that already promises to be another century of extremes, of horrors, for a whole panoply of meliorist principles—in particular, for what Virginia Woolf calls "the melancholy virtue of tolerance."

Let me rather speak first of all as a writer, as a champion of the enterprise of literature, for therein lies the only authority I have.

The writer in me distrusts the good citizen, the "intellectual ambassador," the human rights activist—those roles which are mentioned in the citation for this prize, much as I am committed to them. The writer is more skeptical, more self-doubting, than the person who tries to do (and to support) the right thing.

One task of literature is to formulate questions and construct counter-statements to the reigning pieties. And even when art is not oppositional, the arts gravitate toward contrariness. Literature is dialogue; responsiveness. Literature might be described as the history of human responsiveness to what is alive and what is moribund as cultures evolve and interact with one another.

Writers can do something to combat these clichés of our separateness, our difference—for writers are makers, not just transmitters, of myths. Literature offers not only myths but counter-myths, just as life offers counter-experiences—experiences that confound what you thought you thought, or felt, or believed.

A writer, I think, is someone who pays attention to the world. That means trying to understand, take in, connect with, what wickedness human beings are capable of; and not be corrupted—made cynical, superficial—by this understanding.

Literature can tell us what the world is like.

Literature can give standards and pass on deep knowledge, incarnated in language, in narrative.

Literature can train, and exercise, our ability to weep for those who are not us or ours.

Who would we be if we could not sympathize with those who are not us or ours? Who would we be if we could not forget ourselves, at least some of the time? Who would we be if we could not learn? Forgive? Become something other than we are?

Escaping the prison of national vanity

On the occasion of receiving this glorious prize, this glorious German prize, let me tell you something of my own trajectory.

I was born, a third-generation American of Polish and Lithuanian Jewish descent, two weeks before Hitler came to power. I grew up in the American provinces (Arizona and California), far from Germany, and yet my entire childhood was haunted by Germany, by the monstrousness of Germany, and by the German books and the German music I loved, which set my standard for what is exalted and intense.

Even before Bach and Mozart and Beethoven and Schubert and Brahms, there were a few German books. I am thinking of a teacher in an elementary school in a small town in southern Arizona, Mr. Starkie, who had awed his pupils by telling us that he had fought with Pershing's army in Mexico against Pancho Villa: this grizzled veteran of an earlier American imperialist venture had, it seems, been touched—in translation—by the idealism of German literature, and, having taken in my particular hunger for books, loaned me his own copies of *Werther* and *Immensee*.

Soon after, in my childhood orgy of reading, chance led me to other German books, including Kafka's "In the Penal Colony," where I discovered dread and injustice. And a few years later, when I was a high school student in Los Angeles, I found all of Europe in a German novel. No book has been more important in my life than *The Magic Mountain*—whose subject is, precisely, the clash of ideals at the heart of European civilization. And so on, through a long life that has been steeped in German high culture. Indeed, after the books and the music, which were, given the cultural desert in which I lived, virtually clandestine experiences, came real experiences. For I am also a late beneficiary of the German cultural diaspora, having had the great good fortune of knowing well

some of the incomparably brilliant Hitler refugees, those writers and artists and musicians and scholars that America received in the 1930s and who so enriched the country, particularly its universities. Let me name two I was privileged to count as friends when I was in my late teens and early twenties, Hans Gerth and Herbert Marcuse; those with whom I studied at the University of Chicago and at Harvard, Christian Mackauer and Paul Tillich and Peter Heinrich von Blanckenhagen, and in private seminars, Aron Gurwitsch and Nahum Glatzer; and Hannah Arendt, whom I knew after I moved to New York in my mid-twenties—so many models of the serious, whose memory I would like to evoke here.

But I shall never forget that my engagement with German culture, with German seriousness, all started with obscure, eccentric Mr. Starkie (I don't think I ever knew his first name), who was my teacher when I was ten, and whom I never saw afterward.

And that brings me to a story, with which I will conclude—as seems fitting, since I am neither primarily a cultural ambassador nor a fervent critic of my own government (a task I perform as a good American citizen). I am a story-teller.

So, back to ten-year-old me, who found some relief from the tiresome duties of being a child by poring over Mr. Starkie's tattered volumes of Goethe and Storm. At the time I am speaking of, 1943, I was aware that there was a prison camp with thousands of German soldiers, Nazi soldiers as of course I thought of them, in the northern part of the state, and, knowing I was Jewish (if only nominally, my family having been completely secular and assimilated for two generations; nominally, I knew, was enough for Nazis), I was beset by a recurrent nightmare in which Nazi soldiers had escaped from the prison and had made their way downstate to the bungalow on the outskirts of the town where I lived with my mother and sister, and were about to kill me.

Flash forward to many years later, the 1970s, when my books started to be published by Hanser Verlag, and I came to know the distinguished Fritz Arnold (he had joined the firm in 1965), who was my editor at Hanser until his death in February 1999.

One of the first times we were together, Fritz said he wanted to tell me—presuming, I suppose, that this was a prerequisite to any friendship that might arise between us—what he had done during the war. I assured him that he did not owe me any such explanation; but, of course, I was touched by his bringing up the subject. I should add that Fritz Arnold was not the only German of his generation (he was born in 1916) who, soon after we met, insisted on telling me what he or she had done in Nazi times. And not all of the stories were as innocent as what I was to hear from Fritz.

Anyway, what Fritz told me was that he had been a university student of literature and art history, first in Munich, then in Cologne, when, at the start of the war, he was drafted into the Wehrmacht with the rank of corporal. His family was, of course, anything but pro-Nazi—his father was Karl Arnold, the legendary political cartoonist of *Simplicissimus*—but emigration seemed out of the question, and he accepted, with dread, the call to military service, hoping neither to kill anyone nor to be killed.

Fritz was one of the lucky ones. Lucky, to have been stationed first in Rome (where he refused his superior officer's invitation to be commissioned a lieutenant), then in Tunis; lucky enough to have remained behind the lines and never once to have fired a weapon; and finally, lucky, if that is the right word, to have been taken prisoner by the Americans in 1943, to have been transported by ship across the Atlantic with other captured German soldiers to Norfolk, Virginia, and then taken by train across the continent to spend the rest of the war in a prison camp in. . . northern Arizona.

Then I had the pleasure of telling him, sighing with wonder, for I had already started to be very fond of this man—this was the beginning of a great friendship as well as an intense professional relationship—that while he was a prisoner of war in northern Arizona, I was in the southern part of the state, terrified of the Nazi soldiers who were there, here, and from whom there would be no escape.

And then Fritz told me that what got him through his nearly three years in the

prison camp in Arizona was that he was allowed access to books: he had spent those years reading and rereading the English and American classics. And I told him that what saved me as a schoolchild in Arizona, waiting to grow up, waiting to escape into a larger reality, was reading books, books in translation as well as those written in English.

To have access to literature, world literature, was to escape the prison of national vanity, of philistinism, of compulsory provincialism, of inane schooling, of imperfect destinies and bad luck. Literature was the passport to enter a larger life; that is, the zone of freedom.

Literature was freedom. Especially in a time in which the values of reading and inwardness are so strenuously challenged, literature *is* freedom.