

# SUSAN SONTAG BETWEEN THEORY AND AUTOTHEORY

## WHAT ARE YOUR PRONOUNS?

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This creative critical essay initiates from the writer's existential question about the use of pronouns as expression of one's own identity. Susan Sontag's *Under the Sign of Saturn* and *Primarily Women* (original Dutch title: *Voornamelijk Vrouwen*) by the renowned Dutch novelist and philosopher Connie Palmen, are the essay books that guide her through the quest for one's own voice. As Sontag's writings on theory are brought into dialogue with Palmen's autotheoretical personal essays to gain new insights into the styles of both, the question of pronouns and identity is explored through the contribution to knowledge and self-knowledge from these two major sorts of essay writing.

Keywords: Susan Sontag, Connie Palmen, Autotheory, Writer's Voice

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## WHAT ARE YOUR PRONOUNS?

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*For L*

Pause. Puzzlement, even embarrassment. Standstill.

Why do I hesitate to give the standard reply to the standard question about gender identity? No, it is not gender dysphoria.

A memory: «Your identity is your prison»<sup>3</sup>. The fragile handwriting of the 90-year-old writer and artist Etel Adnan on a yellow post-it note for the Instagram account of the Artistic Director of Serpentine Galleries, Hans-Ulrich Obrist. And her robust voice casting the spell in an Instagram reel.

She/Her/Hers – He/Him/His – They/Them/Their.

These are my options. I can also tick more than one, I am advised by the instructions. Better choose quickly and finish with the form as soon as possible. This commonplace form that will be sent to the local authority, though, demands my identity. Why should my I-identity be defined only by gender? Why should it be imprisoned in third-person pronouns? My «I» longs for other persons of grammar, for other people as well. To open up to what is not my I-identity. My «I» sets out to risk definition beyond the third person.

«I must write myself out of it»<sup>4</sup>.

«It» is «a failure of nerve. About writing (and about my life – but never mind)», as I read.

«I» is Susan Sontag on 19/07/1979, going through dark days, as I read. Sontag, the American intellectual, the cultural critic, the activist. She used to reject such titles. Sontag

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<sup>3</sup> Instagram account of Hans-Ulrich Obrist, 15/11/2021, [https://www.instagram.com/p/CWTWK-WMNKY3/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/CWTWK-WMNKY3/?img_index=1). Accessed: 28/12/2024.

<sup>4</sup> S. Sontag, *As Consciousness in Harnessed to Flesh: Journals and Notebooks 1964-1980*, ed. by D. Rieff, New York (NY), Penguin Books, 2012, p. 300.

is the writer, this is her own definition of her «I»<sup>5</sup>. «I must write. Better be a bad writer», I read.<sup>6</sup> Better set out for the wrong persons – of grammar and beyond. Better choose the inappropriate pronouns. At least I will be «de dader, mij, moi, ik, ich, I»<sup>7</sup>.

In Dutch, the language of writer and philosopher Connie Palmen, the «I» is always guilty, as the same word (de dader) points both to the doer and the wrongdoer. The «I» cannot escape responsibility, if I-identity is determined to escape from its own prison. Palmen's «I» is «a character... nature expressed in disguise, the duality of genuine and ingenuine, truth and imagination», as I heard in her lecture on writer's voice during the *Writers Unlimited Literary Festival* in the Hague, in January 2024.<sup>8</sup> Palmen's «I» is a virtuoso performer of escape, switching voices, switching languages.

Different personal pronouns sound like different languages to me, unknown territories to be mapped. And I dare to risk to perform my I-identity through all available pronouns. No more failure of nerve. No more standstill. I adapt Sontag's pursuit to escape by listening to her voice, while having my ears open to listen to Palmen's voice as well, and her ideas about I-identity. Not as a writer – I am not a writer. As a reader, instead.

I must read myself out of it.

«The most important thing I'm leaving you... they should be published»<sup>9</sup>.

«They» are Sontag's journals. She decided to make them public posthumously. Her entire archive and her library are now at the University of California, Los Angeles<sup>10</sup>.

«You» is David Rieff, Sontag's son. She instructed him about her journals a month before her death, as stated in her 2019 biography by Benjamin Moser. Rieff edited her journals and notebooks and they were published in 2009 and 2012, in two volumes covering the years 1947-1963 and 1964-1980. Sontag's first person I-ntimacy in journals came as a surprise. Her I-identity of the writer is always expressed in the third person in her essays.

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<sup>5</sup> Susan Sontag in Barcelona, 2003, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DZuBFpHym28&t=13s>. Accessed: 28/12/2024.

<sup>6</sup> S. Sontag, *As Consciousness*, cit., p. 300.

<sup>7</sup> C. Palmen, «Reis door mijn kamer», in *de Volkskrant*, 01/05/2020, <https://www.volkskrant.nl/cultuur-media/connie-palmen-ik-kan-pas-schrijven-als-ik-iedereen-buitensluit~b324932b/>. Accessed: 28/12/2024.

<sup>8</sup> Writers Unlimited Literary Festival, The Hague, 19-21/01/2024. <https://www.writersunlimited.nl/en/programme/the-voice-in-search-of-the-character-s-soul>. Accessed: 28/12/2024.

<sup>9</sup> B. Moser, *Sontag: her Life and Work*, New York (NY), Ecco, 2019, p. 577.

<sup>10</sup> Susan Sontag Papers, <https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/kt2489n7qw/>. Accessed: 28/12/2024.

(Why did she want her readers to know what was safely guarded during her lifetime thanks to the third person pronouns?).

In 1980, Sontag published the essay collection *Under the Sign of Saturn*. Writers (Paul Goodman, Antonin Artaud, Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes and Elias Canetti), artists (Hans-Jürgen Syberberg), Nazism as distorted Romanticism, are orbiting around Saturn. Seven essays about six men and a woman (Leni Riefenstahl, whose rehabilitation in the postwar period Sontag criticizes harshly), who are all but one (Paul Goodman) of European origin, explore the connection between Saturnian melancholy and creativity.

«Not for nothing was I born under the sign of Saturn»<sup>11</sup>.

No, this is not a quote from the book, it is an excerpt from Sontag's journals. «I» is Sontag's Saturnian disposition. Walter Benjamin is her alter ego and the essay about Elias Canetti is the most autobiographical of all. No, she does not reveal these in the book either, they were mentioned in Moser's biography.<sup>12</sup>

«I» is the Saturnian writer, Susan Sontag, who, as she states in the first essay of the book, tries «better to hear [her] own voice and discover what [she] really thinks and really feels»<sup>13</sup> – she is in search of her own voice. Sontag «was not a person who had a consistent view of anything, but was constantly reinventing herself»<sup>14</sup>. This book comprises an aspect of her project of reinvention, as she carried it out in the decade of 1970s. There are practically no first or second person pronouns in the book, either personal or possessive. No sign of Sontag's Saturnian I-identity is to be found in the book. The fact that the voice that explores the connection between Saturnian melancholy and creativity is a Saturnian voice, was made known only decades later thanks to the publication of her journals - «that repository of her authentic self»<sup>15</sup> – and her biography.

«It takes courage to write I», I heard Palmen saying in the *Writers Unlimited Literary Festival*.

I read «I» in Palmen's 2023 essay collection *Primarily Women*.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, I read the multilanguage (wrong)doer «I» in an earlier version of the first essay of the book. The collection comprises eight essays about seven women writers (Virginia Woolf, Sylvia

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<sup>11</sup> S. Sontag, *As Consciousness*, cit., p. 303.

<sup>12</sup> B. Moser, *Sontag*, cit., pp. 325, 327.

<sup>13</sup> S. Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn*, New York (NY), Vintage Books, 1981, p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> B. Moser, *Sontag*, cit., p. 369.

<sup>15</sup> *Ivi*, p. 351.

<sup>16</sup> Original Dutch title: *Voornamelijk Vrouwen*.

Plath, Joan Didion, Vivian Gornick, Janet Malcolm, Olivia Laing, Lola – the character in the song of the same title by The Kinks) and a man (Philip Roth), most of them American. The essay titles are each one's most prominent feature. Not just theirs. «They are the features of the writer that I would like to be»<sup>17</sup>, states Palmen in her introductory statement. The second part of the book is Palmen's 2017 essay *The Sin of the Woman*,<sup>18</sup> about Marilyn Monroe, Marguerite Duras, Jane Bowles and Patricia Highsmith, in which she investigates the sources, the risk and the price for female originality, for the originality of her own voice. Her task is the same as Sontag's, the quest for her own voice, the voice of the writer, but she pursues it differently, through first person pronouns. The transformation that lies in the core of Sontag's project is shared by Palmen, as demonstrated in her lecture entitled *Becoming Someone*, about the big step towards the first appearance of the writer's voice, the publication of the first book.<sup>19</sup>

«Who is talking»? Sontag admits in her journal entry from the late 1970s that this is «a problem», because she is «writing in the third person»<sup>20</sup>.

How much of Palmen's voice is projected on the writers that she writes about? Thanks to the intertwining of voices, I am tempted to read the book as Palmen's indirect autobiography. It takes courage to read her «I», as I follow her example to I-ntertwine with her the way she I-ntertwines with her favourite writers. It takes courage to read a book as my indirect autobiography, to challenge myself with the features that I would like to have in my life, in my prosaic existence, and, in most cases, I have not achieved. It takes courage to acknowledge that these features are not of interest only for writers, but they can function as existential guiding lines in life, in my life.

Although I know from Sontag's journals and Moser's biography that she also projects on her favourite Saturnians, this intertwining does not happen on page and I cannot read her book as her indirect autobiography. Her voice in her book calls for another kind of listening from my side, a way that takes up Sontag's approach to the Saturnians. The same happens with *The Sin of the Woman*, the earlier essay that is included in Palmen's book and is written in the third person. It happens, although I know that Marguerite Duras has

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<sup>17</sup> C. Palmen, *Voornamelijk Vrouwen*, Amsterdam, Uitgeverij Prometheus, 2023, p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Original Dutch title: *De zonde van de vrouw*.

<sup>19</sup> Passa Porta Literary Festival, Brussels, 25/03/2023.

<sup>20</sup> S. Sontag, *As Consciousness*, cit., p. 301.

been one of her most important influences.<sup>21</sup> The personal engagement and intertwining are not revealed on page, although most probably they are the driving force of the essay.

I listen to Sontag's and Palmen's voices in-the-making during their quest for (self)-knowledge. I focus on what I believe that defines their distinctive styles, namely their chosen pronouns, the words that refer to their names, substitute them and transform them. Pronouns in *Under the Sign of Saturn* and *Primarily Women*, Sontag's «she» and Palmen's «I», are the linguistic expression of the writers' voices, of their I-identities. My I-identity is in-the-making too, as I learn how to perform it by reading how the choice for different pronouns triggers the performances of theirs, as I am reading myself towards (self)-knowledge. For both Sontag and Palmen, who are one generation apart, writing is a way of being.<sup>22</sup> The voice that I am searching for, me who I am one generation apart from Palmen, is a style of existence distilled from their style of writing. I take up the ways the two writers achieve creativity through the transformation of their voices towards the acquisition of (self)-knowledge.

«My idea of a writer: someone interested in everything»<sup>23</sup>.

This definition is the reason that Sontag wanted to be called «writer», instead of intellectual or critic. Interest is not love. Interest consists in «influences» related to «particular» historical circumstances, I read in Palmen's 1998 novel *I.M.*, whereas she «loves what remains unmodified» and «still believes in the essence of love»<sup>24</sup>. «Paying attention» is the most important virtue of the writer that Sontag wants to be.<sup>25</sup> This writer, who pays attention to the world, is an explorer, who is eager and curious to discover. I-interest is the stage set where Sontag is in search of her voice, her I-identity. This stage becomes a map of the Saturnian territory, where Sontag draws unexplored I-tineries. The reader uses the map and takes Sontag's exploration further. As it happens with all maps, the

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<sup>21</sup> Brmmer op Zee, VPRO TV Channel, 02/12/2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t4wht9YhEfw>. Accessed: 28/12/2024.

<sup>22</sup> For Sontag: Susan Sontag in Barcelona, 2003; For Palmen: Van A tot Z, VPRO TV Channel, 2018, <https://www.vrt.be/vrtmax/a-z/van-a-tot-z--connie-palmen/>. Accessed: 28/12/2024.

<sup>23</sup> S. Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, New York (NY), Penguin Books, 2009, p. 323.

<sup>24</sup> C. Palmen, *I.M.*, Amsterdam, Uitgeverij Prometheus, 1998, pp. 173-174.

<sup>25</sup> S. Sontag, *The Complete Rolling Stone Interview*, New Haven (CT), Yale University Press, 2013, p. 4.

personality of the explorer who makes them is not revealed. The reader becomes an explorer of the I-entities of writers and artists, not of Sontag's Saturnian I-identity, while listening to her voice.

Where does this voice come from? This voice is not on the stage of I-nterest, we do not observe Sontag, the explorer, in the course of drawing the novel I-tineraries. Her voice is off-stage, heard from a distance, an unsettling voice as the reader cannot be certain where exactly Sontag stands in this territory that she has staged on page. Sontag does not describe either herself or the process of her exploration. She only states the discoveries, as she puts them on her map. The characters on her stage are the Saturnians that she writes about and her voice sounds like the voice of the theatre director, who is always off-stage but «not detached at all»<sup>26</sup>, just like her.

«Personal essays are intimate in an inescapable way»<sup>27</sup>.

Palmen starts her book by admitting that personal essays driven by first-person pronouns, I-mprison her «I», this virtuoso of escape, into a game of I-ntimacy. It is a game played in the public sphere. Indeed, personal is not private but «what you inevitably are as soon as you go out of your door»<sup>28</sup>, it is the style in the public sphere, as I read in *The Joy of Aloneness*, Palmen's 2009 essay on her poetics.<sup>29</sup> Her style is «autobiographical», she never writes her autobiography though, but novels in which she transforms her experience with the help of existing narratives<sup>30</sup>. «In the heart of the personal lies, except for the private, the impersonal as of old narratives»<sup>31</sup>, I read. Personal is the public «I» of the writer. I choose it to be the public «I» of the reader, as well, my style in the game of intimacy.

«The women and one man in this book... share the most important characteristic of all real friends and beloved ones»<sup>32</sup>.

I-ntimacy is the stage set in Palmen's book, where her autobiographical I-identity is the character who performs the game of I-ntertwining. It is a game played with the writers that she writes about. I-ntimate is the «I» that becomes «we» with them: «the creative

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<sup>26</sup> S. Sontag, *Rolling Stone*, cit., p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> C. Palmen, *Voornamelijk Vrouwen*, cit., p. 5.

<sup>28</sup> C. Palmen, *Het drama van de afhankelijkheid*, Amsterdam, Uitgeverij Prometheus, 2017, p. 285.

<sup>29</sup> Original Dutch title: *Het geluk van de eenzaamheid*.

<sup>30</sup> *Ivi*, p. 270.

<sup>31</sup> *Ivi*, p. 288.

<sup>32</sup> C. Palmen, *Voornamelijk Vrouwen*, cit., p. 5.

imagination, the revealing “as if” – is our strong point»<sup>33</sup>. It is a game played with readers, with me. I-ntimate is the «I» that addresses me, the reader, when it is transformed into «you»: «the more Vivian Gornick essays you read, the more you realize that they are about herself as well»<sup>34</sup>. Through her «you», I become part of her «we», I am included in her I-ntimacy with the writers in her book. Palmen’s autobiographical voice is the character who dares to say «I love»: «I love... this damn world of differences»<sup>35</sup>. This love is neither smooth nor sentimental. It is a transformative force for the lovers’ I-identity and a source of (self)-knowledge, as I read in Palmen’s books about love (the novel *I.M.*) and grief (*Logboek of a merciless Year*)<sup>36</sup>. This writer, who practises I-ntimacy in search of her voice and I-identity, is a weaver of relationships and encourages me to follow her example.

The voice that invites writers and myself to I-ntertwine with her, is a performer on her stage of I-ntimacy. This performer, though, does not have just one voice. Her voice is a hybrid generated by the I-ntertwining between her and every writer she includes in her essays. Even more, it is a multiple voice. Indeed, in *Primarily Women* there are eight hybrids, as many as the chapters, eight one-act monologues, and Palmen is everywhere and nowhere on this stage, a performer whose voice is merged with the voice of each character she presents, as if it had been herself. This is the indirect autobiography and it is not the first time that Palmen does it. In her 2015 novel *Your Story, My Story*, which is a monologue of Ted Hughes, I listened to the hybrid voice of the narrator, pointing out to both Hughes and Palmen. The voice of the weaver of relationships is as unsettling as the voice of the explorer.

The different pronouns chosen by the explorer and the weaver of relationships, result in different styles of opening up towards their subjects and their readers. Sontag considers herself to be «the vehicle, the medium, the instrument of some force beyond herself»<sup>37</sup>, while for Palmen, writing is her «marriage to the world»<sup>38</sup>. Sontag removes almost all books from her workspace in order to hear her own voice,<sup>39</sup> while for Palmen «every

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<sup>33</sup> *Ivi*, p. 25.

<sup>34</sup> *Ivi*, p. 49.

<sup>35</sup> *Ivi*, p. 88.

<sup>36</sup> Original Dutch title: *Logboek van een onbarmhartig jaar*.

<sup>37</sup> S. Sontag, *As Consciousness*, cit., p. 30.

<sup>38</sup> Van A tot Z, VPRO TV Channel.

<sup>39</sup> S. Sontag, *Saturn*, cit., p. 10.



conversation is a musical piece»<sup>40</sup>. The fact that Sontag deliberately removes herself from the stage is consistent with her topic, as the Saturnian personality is subtle and expressed indirectly. The courageous «I» of the writer, enters the stage, as the existential aloneness of Palmen is different of that of the melancholic disposition and is summarized in the title of her poetics, *The Joy of Aloneness*, which points out to the gains from being different and getting her writings to the world. The two books correspond to different aspects of creativity, which I have been seeing as complementary, from the moment when I kept writing «on-stage» rather than «on page», from the moment that I have conceived the books through a theatrical metaphor.

(How am I going to join them? On-stage or maybe off?).

«With Connie everything lasts long»<sup>41</sup>.

With Susan, also, everything lasts long. For the writer who is interested in everything, exploration is a never-ending process, as there is always eagerness for the next place, the next idea, the next book, the next... The stress falls on the future, on the next interesting experience that will enrich the map, that will extend it limitlessly and the most important aspect of the I-tinerary is the transition. The stress falls on the map itself, not on any of the encounters. No wonder that Sontag has worked on a vast range of topics, among others, photography, pornography, style, illness, art, as a writer, a film director, an activist. The explorer explores by composing an argument.

The weaving of I-ntimacy lasts long because the process of going deep into another person is slow, it focuses in a kind of durational present. Palmen's big love in her novel *I.M.* mentions it as he feels this duration, as he states «no one has deepened into my being as much as you»<sup>42</sup>. Intimate relationships take time. I read the slow process in the range of Palmen's topics, as she focuses on the big topics only, namely love and death. I read the slow process in the I-ntertwining between Palmen and each one of the writers in her book, as she shows her reading process in her writing.

The depth of insight that Sontag achieves is remarkable. The reader, though, is not presented with the process of the exhaustive attention that Sontag has paid to every writer and artist included in the book. Her effort is not shown on page. «The reader should not

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<sup>40</sup> Preludium, 26/11/2024 <https://www.preludium.nl/schrijver-connie-palmen>. Accessed: 28/12/2024.

<sup>41</sup> C. Palmen, *I.M.*, cit., p. 84.

<sup>42</sup> *Ivi*, p. 274.

see how hard I worked», Sontag stated in a 2003 interview about her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*<sup>43</sup>. The reader is always presented with the result of the exploration, the argument and the thesis, not the process followed by the «I». She does not allow us to see how this experience has changed her. Sontag's and Palmen's distinct temporalities belong to their distinct stages, to what they allow us to see. They make part of their personal style, the public persona that they adopt as they bring their works to the readers.

«Goodbye, Janet»<sup>44</sup>.

At the end of her essay about Janet Malcolm, Palmen waves her farewell in the way that she had craved to be addressed by her primary school teacher. Palmen never met Janet Malcolm, she had not even wished or tried. The same happens with Sontag and Paul Goodman, whom she names as an important influence, but never wanted any personal relationship with him.<sup>45</sup> In both cases, *Genuine Contact is not the Aim*<sup>46</sup> – this is the title of an essay by Palmen that discusses relationships through books as public, mediated intimacy that is driven by the different personal styles of writers. At book launches, when the contact between writer and readers is supposed to be direct, I have seen Palmen interacting with readers in the fleeting ways of «casual intimacy»<sup>47</sup> – book signing, a photograph, if requested. Mediated intimacy, though, feels as powerful as intimacy with beloved people, as Palmen states in the introduction of her book.

When I read, everything lasts long. When I read Palmen, I intertwine with her and the writers she writes about, by following her example. I am invited to become their intimate by becoming her intimate, her multiple voices on-stage are the weaver of public intimacy. In the case of Sontag, this role is offered to the argument. The argument directs the reader's attention towards the stage. But Sontag's unsettling voice is situated off-stage. As a result, mediated intimacy takes place with the writers and the artists that Sontag has selected, not with Sontag herself. In both cases, public intimacy leads to the generation of doubt. Exceptional writers like Sontag and Palmen invite readers to their public intimacy not in order to impose their views on them, but to initiate a conversation. In their own ways, they open up towards the world.

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<sup>43</sup> Susan Sontag in Barcelona, 2003.

<sup>44</sup> C. Palmen, *Voornamelijk Vrouwen*, cit., p. 48.

<sup>45</sup> B. Moser, *Sontag*, cit., p. 5.

<sup>46</sup> C. Palmen, *Het drama*, cit., pp. 69-167.

<sup>47</sup> B. Moser, *Sontag*, cit., p. 444.

«Travelling means being uncomfortable», stated Sontag, the explorer, who loves travelling.<sup>48</sup>

The «I» of the explorer is confronted with unexpected encounters, as she is driven by her insatiable interest. She is unable to shield herself from the world. The reader, who is prompted by the essays to become an explorer like her, becomes uncomfortable as well, and may confront her. Sontag, the writer, not Susan, the Saturnian, though.

«Melancholy... is my subject»<sup>49</sup>.

Sontag feels the pain of every Saturnian she writes about. In her books, though, her pain remains hidden. «Sontag does not write “I” and “cancer” in the same sentence», I read in Anne Boyer’s *The Undying*, about how cancer survivor Sontag wrote *Illness as Metaphor*.<sup>50</sup> In Sontag’s writings, pain is always of others. The explorer pays attention, she is *Regarding the Pain of Others*, of other Saturnians. As Susan, she is their intimate. As Sontag, the writer, she is their Other. Interest stages the pain of others. This state of otherness becomes an exercise in autonomy, Sontag’s own autonomy and the autonomy of writers and artists that she writes about. Sontag makes this choice because she wants to ask «not what [I] am experiencing. But rather what really goes on in the world of the sick»<sup>51</sup>. Their voices are clearly separated on page from the voice of Sontag. It becomes an exercise for the reader’s autonomy as well, how to make one’s own voice heard, as distinct from the voices of others. Third-person pronouns present Susan as the Other of Sontag. An unsettling separation of the private from the public self on page (or rather on-stage?). The price for the autonomy of the explorer. The public intimacy stage of the explorer is a stage of risk. Too much otherness may make the explorer sound distant, disengaged, impersonal, and finally drawn her voice. Never Sontag’s voice, though.

«In combat mode»<sup>52</sup>. This is how Palmen reads Vivian Gornick.

Going deep into someone during the process of weaving a relationship, means encroachment, trespass, friction, two personalities that clash. The moment when «I» becomes «we» and «you», is a moment of pain. I read this pain in Palmen’s essays, as the prize to be paid for I-ntertwining with another person. Especially when there is strong

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<sup>48</sup> Susan Sontag in Barcelona, 2003.

<sup>49</sup> S. Sontag, *As Consciousness*, cit., p. 303.

<sup>50</sup> A. Boyer, *The Undying*, New York (NY), Penguin Books, 2019, p. 6.

<sup>51</sup> S. Sontag, *Rolling Stone*, cit., p. 1.

<sup>52</sup> C. Palmen, *Voornamelijk Vrouwen*, cit., p. 46.

disagreement, as with Vivian Gornick; Palmen does not endorse Gornick's rejection of love as a source of self-knowledge.<sup>53</sup> Reading, then, becomes a love-fight. The stage of I-ntimacy is the stage of pain. The title that Palmen gave to the 2017 edition of her collected essays is *The Drama of Dependence*.<sup>54</sup> Identity is a gift that is offered by the beloved others, and when Palmen's second big love dies, her «dearest "I" dies»<sup>55</sup>, I read in her book about grief. The courageous «I» on page can only be transformed into «we» and «you», when she accepts dependence on beloved others. On the two men that Palmen loved deeply or on the writers with whom she practises public intimacy on the stage of her book. I read Palmen's essays as an exercise in dependence, in my dependence. On the cover of her book, the name «Connie Palmen» stands alone. First-person pronouns in the text, though, make her name sound like «Virginia Woolf» or «Philip Roth» or «Lola». An unsettling merge of personalities in the personal essays of intimacy. The prize for dependence.

«Dependence is what the 20<sup>th</sup> century forgot»<sup>56</sup>, I hear Palmen saying, but now it is the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Western philosophy initiates from the individual, and strives to open it up towards the world and others. Even phenomenology, although it aims to abolish the subject/object divide, still starts from the subject that is in and towards the world, according to Merleau-Ponty.<sup>57</sup> In Palmen's books, though, I read that the uniqueness of one's own voice is the result of the unique I-ntertwining with others, it is the (self)-knowledge acquired thanks to a love relationship or a love-fight.

(How much pain am I prepared to endure in search of my I-identity?)

«I recognized it very well. Too well»<sup>58</sup>.

«It» is drinking. I read Palmen stating or implying aspects of her I-identity that she elaborates and projects on writers and their work. I see her «I» revealed on page, defenceless, as she often compares aspects of her life with the life of her beloved writers. «In personal essays you make yourself known», I heard Palmen saying.<sup>59</sup> Her personal essays

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<sup>53</sup> *Ivi*, p. 51.

<sup>54</sup> Original Dutch title: *Het drama van de afhankelijkheid*.

<sup>55</sup> C. Palmen, *Logboek van een ombarmhartig jaar*, Amsterdam, Uitgeverij Prometheus, 2011, p. 27.

<sup>56</sup> Van A tot Z, VPRO TV Channel, 2018.

<sup>57</sup> M. Merleau-Ponty. *Phenomenology of Perception*, London-New York (NY), Routledge, 2012, p. LXXVII.

<sup>58</sup> C. Palmen, *Voornamelijk Vrouwen*, cit., p. 72.

<sup>59</sup> NPO Radio 1 Nieuweekend, 14/10/2023, <https://www.nporadio1.nl/fragmenten/nieuweekend/43c81e40-4c06-490e-843e-6a67d9f38df7/2023-10-14-essays-voornamelijk-vrouwen>. Accessed: 28/12/2024.

could be included in the vast field of autotheoretical writing, where «substance and contents of one's life»<sup>60</sup> are employed to make sense of existence, in an attempt to «wrangle both idiosyncrasy (auto) and conceptuality (theory)»<sup>61</sup>. The «I» that is made known exists in «a matrix of self-other relations»<sup>62</sup>. The personal engagement with the topic is made known, the need that makes the writer courageous enough to set out for weaving relationships and be prepared to lose and grieve as a result of her opening up. It is not mere intellectual interest that drives the weaver of relationships on page. Sontag's interest in Saturnians, was also vital for her existence, since «melancholy... is [her] subject»<sup>63</sup>. She just never revealed this on page.

Anything revealed on page has been used in public discussion to hurt Palmen. The public intimacy stage of the weaver of relationships is a stage of risk. Overexposure is another aspect of this risky stage. The kind of information that is shared may not function as a catalyst for I-ntimacy, but as a trigger for gossip. In this case, first-person pronouns cannot open up to other experiences. Alternatively, the weaver may slide into the networking self of social media and create a fake I-ntimacy, as dependence in networks is not on people but on connection between devices - «lost connection» refers to a technical fault, not to broken relationships. Palmen always finds the right balance that allows her to act as a weaver of relationships thanks to her autobiographical style. Recently, she revealed that she had destroyed all her diaries and personal papers, so that nothing may be available for posthumous publication<sup>64</sup> - the exact opposite of what Sontag has chosen.

(But how about me? How much am I prepared to reveal about myself when I say «I»?)

«You cannot have fictional elements in an essay...»

«...but you can have essayistic elements in a novel»<sup>65</sup>, continued Sontag. In fact, she had done it in all of her three novels: *The Benefactor*, *The Volcano Lover*, *In America*.

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<sup>60</sup> L. Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing and Criticism*, Cambridge (MA), The MIT Press, 2021, p. 235.

<sup>61</sup> M. Covic, «Everybody's Autotheory», in *Modern Language Quarterly*, vol. 83, n. 1, 2022, pp. 81-116: 83.

<sup>62</sup> Ivi, p. 95.

<sup>63</sup> S. Sontag, *As Consciousness*, cit., p. 303.

<sup>64</sup> *Een avond rond de schrijversbiografie*, 22/03/2022, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LGSS9BfixSE&t=64s&fbclid=IwY2xjawHdhCN-leHRuA2FibQIxMQABHalXU5d0LcvwJR5RuQ7VWtj2--Gz3cvmqgH1xCqn5QGRFPXFtqzooOE-BoA\\_aem\\_63xM8QfJOV3R\\_VrVXhdXaw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LGSS9BfixSE&t=64s&fbclid=IwY2xjawHdhCN-leHRuA2FibQIxMQABHalXU5d0LcvwJR5RuQ7VWtj2--Gz3cvmqgH1xCqn5QGRFPXFtqzooOE-BoA_aem_63xM8QfJOV3R_VrVXhdXaw). Accessed: 28/12/2024.

<sup>65</sup> Susan Sontag in Barcelona, 2003.

*The Laws*, Palmen's first book, is a philosophical, Faustian novel, while I read elaboration of philosophical concepts in all her novels.

The clash between reality and fiction, facts and interpretation, as well as the limits of fiction, are recurrent topics in Palmen's work. In 1998, three years after the death of her first big love, she wrote the novel *I.M.* where her autobiographical style challenged the definitions of autobiography and novel. I read how love can be a transformative force and a source of (self)-knowledge. Love is fiction, not because it is fake, but because fiction is a linguistic construction that aims to make sense of the world, as I read in Palmen's essay on her poetics.<sup>66</sup> In her novel, love is made like a book, and the lovers are writers, two strangers who end up in an intimate relationship, written *in margine* (*I.M.*) of their various writings and readings. I read *I.M.* as a research of fiction through intimacy, and vice versa.

«Personal essays are the closest to fiction», I heard Palmen saying.<sup>67</sup>

I read *Primarily Women*, and the essays feel closer to Palmen's most intimate fiction, like *I.M.*, than to her collected essays *The Drama of Dependence*. I feel the same when I read the section «Loves» of the latter book, which comprises personal essays about her two big loves, as well as close friends and beloved writers.<sup>68</sup> «Character is subject and object in one», both face and mask, person and character, I heard Palmen stating during her lecture on human voice and character in the *Writers Unlimited Literary Festival*. This is how «I» becomes a fictional character, when it enters the stage of I-ntimacy in fiction. The «I» in autobiographical writings is both fictional and I-ntimate. But how about non-fictional writings? It sounds like a paradox that the «I» would become a fictional character there as well, since autotheoretical writings are supposed to approach topics and concepts «from the perspective of one's lived experience»<sup>69</sup>. However, lived experience «responds not only to people's experiences, but also to how people live through and respond to those experiences»<sup>70</sup>. The reality of lived experience is not directly available to the «I», but

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<sup>66</sup> C. Palmen, *Het drama*, cit., p. 280.

<sup>67</sup> Pompidou, VRT Radio, 25/10/2023, <https://www.vrt.be/vrtmax/luister/radio/p/pompidou~31-7/pompidou~31-22349-0/>. Accessed: 28/12/2024.

<sup>68</sup> C. Palmen, *Het drama*, cit., pp. 393-458.

<sup>69</sup> L. Fournier, «Sick Women, Sad Girls and Selfie Theory: Autotheory as Contemporary Feminist Practice», in *Auto/Biography Studies*, vol. 33, n. 3, 2018, pp. 643-662: 643.

<sup>70</sup> I. McIntosh, S. Wright, «Exploring what the Notion of 'Lived Experience' Offers for Social Policy Analysis», in *Journal of Social Policy*, vol. 48, n. 3, 2019, pp. 449-467: 452.

«reaches its culmination first in memory»<sup>71</sup>, according to philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey, who «first developed and popularized it as a philosophical concept»<sup>72</sup>.

Memory reworks experience. Memory makes fiction intimately ruthless, claims Philip Roth in *The Ruthless Intimacy of Fiction*.<sup>73</sup> Palmen considers this essay to be a model for personal essays, as I read in her essay about him.<sup>74</sup> I read in Roth's essay the ruthless self-analysis, the struggle to go deep into experience and reveal elements from the writer's past in a way that they may be accessible to readers in the present, the meticulous details that are painful and irritating, but there is no choice for the writer, he must deconstruct himself and remake himself again in writing. In the writing of fiction. And it seems to me, that this is the only kind of writing that the work of memory is able to do, as it transforms experience into stories that the writer uses in order to make sense of himself and the world. And it seems to me that the autobiographical style could be defined by this work of memory. «I» means memory and memory is defined by fiction.

I read in Palmen's *I.M.* how she wrote her novel *The Laws* by turning her experience into narratives with the help of existing fictions.<sup>75</sup> Lived experience is not private, but «an encounter between ourselves and the world»<sup>76</sup>, between the «I» and others, between «I» and the fictions of others. The dependence of the weaver of relationships on the stage of I-ntimacy is double. This is what Palmen calls «the personal», as I have stated before, the style of one's writing, of one's existence. «Voice is style, is character», I heard Palmen saying in the 2024 *Writers Unlimited Literary Festival*. Therefore, there is a way to have fictional elements in an essay: it happens when I-ntimacy and its lived experience are allowed into non-fictional writings of theory. And as the «I» transforms itself into a character by reworking her experience in memory according to her style, she also transforms theory into autotheory. This is my definition of autotheoretical, personal essays: the non-fictional elaboration of concepts based on an «auto» (which means «self» in Greek) that enters the stage as a fictional character. And this is the closest to fiction that an essay writer can get.

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<sup>71</sup> P. Casey, "Lived Experience. Defined and Critiqued", in *Critical Horizons*, vol. 24, n. 3, 2023, pp. 282-297: 290.

<sup>72</sup> Ivi, p. 282.

<sup>73</sup> P. Roth, *Why Write? Collected Nonfiction 1960-2013: Collected Nonfiction 1960-2014*, New York (NY), Library of America, 2017, pp. 391-400.

<sup>74</sup> C. Palmen, *Voornamelijk Vrouwen*, cit., p. 96.

<sup>75</sup> C. Palmen, *I.M.*, cit., p. 100.

<sup>76</sup> P. Casey, "Lived Experience", cit., p. 292.

«How do fictions communicate truths we could not understand through other means?»<sup>77</sup>.

«We» is Judith Butler. In contrast to Palmen,<sup>78</sup> they do not trust the creative role of fiction in the life of transgender people, however they are open to explore fiction's contribution to knowledge and self-knowledge. Butler's unanswered question becomes vital, since what autofictional personal essays contribute to essay writing is the introduction of the fiction of the I-identity,

Butler mistrusts fiction with revealing the truth. In Palmen, though, I read that «only the “as if” gives the opportunity to tell the truth»<sup>79</sup> and the «as if» is the fiction of the stage. Sontag also believes that fiction has a privileged access to truth, as it can approach it from multiple points of view. And she gives as an example the three endings of her novel *The Volcano Lover*, spoken by three different characters.<sup>80</sup> I read the same in Palmen's *Primarily Women*, thanks to the fact that she has transformed her «I» into a character of fiction. The multiple voices that she adopts as a result of hybridizing her voice with the voices of the writers in her essays, offer eight different solutions to the quest of the writer's voice.

The multiple I-identities that are also expressed in the opening up of the first-person pronouns to other persons, turn the stage of I-ntimacy into a stage that challenges the truth that theory claims for itself. «Genuine», is the word that I read throughout Palmen's essays. While the explorer of an argument is in search of what is true and explores aspects of Saturnianism by employing a single voice, the primary concern of the weaver of relationships is to be genuine, true and real at the same time, by adopting the law of the stage, which is the «as if» that transforms her into a character. All Palmen's voices are genuine, «the mask is the face» as Sontag states in her essay “On Style” from the essay collection *Against Interpretation*. Remarkably, I read Sontag's affirmation of style as fiction as a reference included in Palmen's poetics.<sup>81</sup> Personal essays bring to essay writing fiction's strongest point: the character who is genuine without being true.

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<sup>77</sup> J. Butler, *Who's Afraid of Gender*, New York (NY), Penguin Books, 2024, p. 146.

<sup>78</sup> C. Palmen, *Voornamelijk Vrouwen*, cit., p. 92.

<sup>79</sup> C. Palmen, *I.M.*, cit., p. 30.

<sup>80</sup> Susan Sontag in Barcelona, 2003.

<sup>81</sup> C. Palmen, *Het drama*, cit., p. 290.



I heard Palmen saying that in essays, «the “I” is defenceless»<sup>82</sup>. The «as if» of the stage protects the «I» in personal essays, by relieving it from the burden of the true and offering it the potentiality of the genuine. I read the features that Palmen attributes to each writer. She wants all of them for herself as well, but what is her own primary feature? She does not reveal it in the book, she has not revealed it in any interviews either. She is not untrue, she claims the right to being genuine. Sontag’s «I», on the other hand, is protected by the third-person pronouns, the choice of adopting an off-stage voice. A third-person pronoun can also protect the «I» by keeping it on stage, though. Sontag mentions how Barthes transformed himself when he «wrote about himself in the third person»<sup>83</sup>. It was his way of transforming himself into a character. The choice for fiction transforms the effect of pronouns.

Etymologically, epistemology, namely learning and knowing, is derived from «epi» (Greek word for «upon») and «histemi» (Greek word for «place»)<sup>84</sup>. The contribution to knowledge from theory and autotheoretical personal essays is defined by the placement of the «I» of the writer, either off- or on-stage. The off-stage «I», the explorer of the argument, contributes to knowledge the single truth, while the on-stage «I», the weaver of relationships, contributes the multiple faces of the genuine. Both ways of making sense of experience reveal aspects that had not been considered or imagined before and influence the way of thinking of readers. However, only fiction is able not only to make sense of reality, but also «influence the experience of reality», as I read in Palmen’s poetics.<sup>85</sup> With time, we often forget that fictions «live within and through language»<sup>86</sup>, we forget that they are not facts, but a way in which reality has become transformed through the work of invention. «We live autobiographically, in a personal reality and at the same time in the story that we make of it. Every autobiography, either written or not, is a product of forgery»<sup>87</sup>. Of genuine forgery.

And love is the most genuine forgery, a creation by two people. I read about love as a source of (self)-knowledge in Palmen’s novels and essays,<sup>88</sup> as well as about love as a

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<sup>82</sup> Pompidou, VRT Radio, 25/10/2023.

<sup>83</sup> S. Sontag, *Saturn*, cit., p. 175.

<sup>84</sup> E. Partridge, *Origins*, London, Routledge, 1958, pp. 892-893.

<sup>85</sup> C. Palmen, *Het drama*, cit., p. 282.

<sup>86</sup> *Ivi*, p. 280.

<sup>87</sup> *Ivi*, p.270.

<sup>88</sup> C. Palmen, *Voornamelijk Vrouwen*, cit., pp. 51-52.

way in which a person becomes «known, recognized and believed»<sup>89</sup>, since the practice of love is the way that she relates to the world. As a result, the adjective that I have attributed to her craft, since she has not revealed her own preference, is «weaving». It is not a sentimental, smooth love, but the one that is both rapture and pain in order to be able to act as a transformative force in the living reality of the lovers. Love is not a fact, but a creation by two people that is constantly being constructed, demolished and reshaped. It is a fiction, and if lovers decide or if one of them dies, it will cease to exist. No, not completely. This love that lives in the world, is a fiction that is added to the lived reality of the world. The love that does not exist anymore, has already had the opportunity to change the world. Even more, if the lover who survives is a writer like Palmen. «Though lovers be lost love shall not» – after having read Palmen, I read Dylan Thomas differently.

Fiction, including fiction of love, makes sense of experience by casting doubt in a different way than the argument. The argument aims to persuade, whereas fiction seduces the reader, myself, into placing me within the proposed «as if», so that I may make it a condition for my own lived experience. It is the suspension of disbelief that theatre must earn every single moment of the performance. Fiction refrains from the stability and certainty offered by the argument and functions by destabilizing me further. If reading had been an exercise in tonal harmony, Sontag's voice is the melody and I am invited to create the lines of other voices (the writers and the artists that she writes about) by subordinating them to hers. My task is to recreate the structure that led to Sontag's voice, the process that she does not share with me. Reading Sontag is definitely not easy. To remain in the tonal harmony metaphor, Palmen's voice is the bass line that runs through the whole piece and I am invited to create the other voices (of the writers that she writes about) so that a melody may be heard. The melody line changes according to the way each reader hears the hybrid voice of Palmen. However, Palmen's own voice is not lost in a series of merges, as the bass line is always there. I need to listen to the melody that Palmen writes and create the construct of voices above the bass line, by playing by the ear. No two harmony students ever write the same melody line, as lived experience is ambiguous. And this is the way that the fictional «I» destabilizes me. Reading Palmen is definitely not easy.

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<sup>89</sup> C. Palmen, *Logboek*, cit., p. 88.

The multiplicity of voices and the resulting ambivalence are a risky game. In the last «act» of Palmen's novel *Lucifer* I read the limitations of fictionalization.<sup>90</sup> The creative game may generate interesting stories that claim their place in reality, but overfictionalization just fills the world with stories, with fiction that could be nothing more than a ludicrous creation. The circle of artists, writers and intellectuals who have been telling their stories to the writer throughout the book, acknowledge this danger and admit that, after all, these are only stories and they can never be certain about what happened. On the other hand, the single off-stage voice that creates the argument can become too authoritative, stale and detached. Only readers can decide whether theory and autotheoretical personal essays are saved from these dangerous extremes. Travelling is risky. Love is risky. Reading is risky as well.

«I shall go on grieving that he is no longer alive to talk in new books»<sup>91</sup>.

No, this «I» is not Palmen. Sontag wrote the first essay of the book shortly after the death of the American writer Paul Goodman. «I» can be found 64 times in this essay whereas only five times in the rest of the book. «I was. I am»<sup>92</sup>. This «I», one of the precious few in the book, is Sontag and she is «toujours fidèle» – ever faithful to Roland Barthes. Sontag had a very close relationship with the French philosopher and a great admiration for his work. However, those four words are the only hint she allows in the essay that she wrote as an account of his work, shortly after his premature death. She keeps their relationship private, she deliberately removes her «I» in favour of third person pronouns even from this essay, although it was written during a period of grief for her.

Sontag grieves Goodman, the writer whose voice she admires, but with whom she had avoided any personal relationship. In her journals she feels that with this essay she becomes an American writer because she is «finally handling/touching autobiographical material directly»<sup>93</sup>. Grief is the Saturnian feature that Sontag connects to her I-identity. When I read in the essay on Goodman about writing as an eternal search for voice, about her ascetic writing conditions in a tiny room in Paris, and the strong relationships that Sontag creates with the writers that she reads,<sup>94</sup> I expected a personal essay book about

<sup>90</sup> C. Palmen, *Lucifer*, Amsterdam, Uitgeverij Prometheus, 2008, pp. 307-350.

<sup>91</sup> S. Sontag, *Saturn*, cit., p. 10.

<sup>92</sup> *Ivi*, p. 179.

<sup>93</sup> S. Sontag, *As Consciousness*, cit., p. 223.

<sup>94</sup> S. Sontag, *Saturn*, cit., pp. 3-4.

Saturnian creativity, I thought that this essay was the introduction. In her journals, Sontag writes: «the only review of *Under the Sign of Saturn* would be the eighth essay – an essay describing me as I have described them»<sup>95</sup>. The essays of the book are seven. Sontag never wrote the eighth, autobiographical essay. She never wrote a book with personal essays.

(Why does the essay on Goodman introduce a book that was never written?).

«Anyone with even a mediocre psychological insight knows that drastic changes in a person's appearance are alarming omens»<sup>96</sup>.

No, this is not written by Sontag. I do not read even one «I» in Palmen's essay about Sylvia Plath, as it is written almost entirely in the third person and without any references to Palmen's own experience. In her 2015 novel *Your Story, My Story*, I read a biographical monologue of Ted Hughes about his relationship with Sylvia Plath and I have heard Palmen repeating in interviews that she learned how to love Plath through Hughes's love for her.

(Why did Palmen silence this strong bond in a book driven by her relationships with her beloved writers?).

Autonomous – Authentic – Unapproachable – Audacious – Merciless – Personal – Equivocal – Insubordinate.

No, these are not features of Sontag, the autonomous explorer. I copy the table of contents from Palmen's essay book. The bold «I» of the writer that aspires to these powerful personality traits, approaches them through an exercise in dependence. This exercise, though, happens in aloneness. «I shut everyone outside»<sup>97</sup>, as Palmen writes. Aloneness is an existential need for Palmen, although she is from nature inclined towards intimacy and dependence.<sup>98</sup>

(Why is the creativity of the bold «I» driven by dependence?).

Slowness – Faithlessness – Microscopic gaze – Allegory – Acedia – the Saturnian Pace of Writing – Irony.

No, these are not features of Palmen, who experiences *the Drama of Dependence*. These are the main Saturnian features that Sontag lists in her essay on Walter Benjamin.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> S. Sontag, *As Consciousness*, cit., p. 316.

<sup>96</sup> C. Palmen, *Voornamelijk Vrouwen*, cit., p. 23.

<sup>97</sup> *Ivi*, p. 10.

<sup>98</sup> C. Palmen, *Logboek*, cit., p. 81.

<sup>99</sup> S. Sontag, *Saturn*, cit., pp. 119-120.

The Saturnian personality is subtle, but this is not an obstacle in the quest of autonomy. The autonomous «I» of the explorer maps the unknown territories in a different kind of existential aloneness.

(Why is the creativity of the subtle, Saturnian «I» driven by autonomy?).

«Secrets were necessary... to offer me the autonomy that I needed»<sup>100</sup>.

No, it is not Sontag who wrote this. Palmen, who has made dependence the central concept of her oeuvre, starts her book of intimate essays by sharing the most important feature that she aims at as a writer: autonomy. It is at the top of her table of contents and it is the feature that she attributes to Virginia Woolf. And her rooms of her own in the various homes where she has lived are the spaces where she finds her autonomous voice.

(Why does Palmen choose dependence although she longs for autonomy?).

«I know how good and right it is to love... I am reborn»<sup>101</sup>.

No, I did not read this in Palmen's book. It is an entry from Sontag's journals. It seems that for Sontag, the autonomous writer who was interested in everything, love was the ultimate cause. «A love relationship cannot happen without dependence», I heard Palmen saying.<sup>102</sup>

(Why does Sontag choose autonomy although she longs for the dependence of love?).

Pause. Puzzlement, even embarrassment. Was my reading wrong? The distinct processes initiated by I-interest and I-intimacy, which I have described as leading to autonomy and dependence, do not seem that distinct anymore.

«It has not often happened in my life to have been able to reconcile my desire for autonomy with my desire for intimacy», I read at the end of Palmen's essay on autonomy.<sup>103</sup> Autonomy depends on dependence. «Connie is so cheerfully hopeless»<sup>104</sup>, because most probably also she is placed Under the Sign of Saturn. In creative aloneness, joy and melancholy depend on each other. Neither Sontag nor Palmen become prisoners either of their bold or subtle character traits. Neither Sontag nor Palmen become prisoners either of autonomy or dependence. Neither Sontag nor Palmen choose pronouns in order to become their prisoners. Pronouns depend on each other in order to contribute to

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<sup>100</sup> C. Palmen, *Voornamelijk Vrouwen*, cit., p. 10.

<sup>101</sup> S. Sontag, *Reborn: Journals and Notebooks 1947-1963*, ed. by D. Rieff, New York (NY), Penguin Books, 2009. p. 34.

<sup>102</sup> Van A tot Z, VPRO TV Channel, 2018.

<sup>103</sup> C. Palmen, *Voornamelijk Vrouwen*, cit., p. 19.

<sup>104</sup> C. Palmen, *I.M.*, cit., p. 81.

knowledge of self and the world. No pronoun is a shut-in and neither are Sontag and Palmen. Reading them is an exercise in autonomy and dependence, but most important of all, it is an exercise in opening up from the point of view of autonomy towards dependence and vice versa.

In 2019, I visited the exhibition *The Joy of Nature* in the Van Gogh Museum, in Amsterdam. Vincent van Gogh's and David Hockney's landscapes, created more than a century apart, were displayed side by side. And the gaze of the one artist was triggering a new way of looking at the point of view of the other. Could I adapt the «Dave and Vince» exhibition<sup>105</sup> into a «Connie and Susan» text? Could I hear the windows of their rooms open? Could I hear the hard choices that shaped their exceptional voices? Could I hear their voices as part of the same musical piece? Could I hear them transformed?

Susan's voice out of the room in Paris.

Connie's voice out of the room of her home in Amsterdam.

And my window. My room.

(your session has expired – do you want to resubmit the form?)

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<sup>105</sup> This was David Hockney's secret title of the exhibition that he revealed during an introductory interview [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vA\\_I0qwnh\\_w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vA_I0qwnh_w). Accessed: 28/12/2024.

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