

Regard

Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor

Susan Sontag loved the word *regard* for its multivalent resonance. It is a noun, and it is a verb. As a noun it describes is a kind of attention, a kind of looking; it is also a kind of love or care, or a kind of esteem, admiration. *To regard* is to look “intensively”: etymologically the word derives from *re-*, intensive prefix, + O.Fr. *garder* “to look, heed”; *garder* corresponds to Frankish **wardon*, which refers to a “collective sense of ‘a keeping, a custody,’” and gives us our word *ward* (as in, a ward of the state). The word evolves in English to connote “consideration, appearance, kindly feeling,” and a kind of “esteem, affection” (*Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*). Behind this shift is a valuation that becomes clear when we remember that the words *regard*, *guard*, and *guardian* are closely related. One guards only what one “regards” as valuable. No wonder Sontag, an admirer by constitution and indeed by profession, was attracted to the word. Her lifework as a critic was devoted to regarding those writers, artists, and filmmakers whose **work** she valued most. There was no point in her writing otherwise. The title of Nancy Kates’s 2015 documentary of Sontag is pitch-perfect: *Regarding Susan Sontag*.

Regard is a particular form of attention: intensive, evaluative, care-ful. It might be, as Jane Bennett puts it in a slightly different (but not unrelated) context, a perceptual style (5). “To hold in regard” connotes not just a “holding close,” a protecting from

122 harm but also a holding out as exemplary. Regard links the individual and the collective in an **affective** economy which frankly disregards the economy of profit and financial accounting. Regard is thus related to an aesthetic, a **sensibility** (certainly for Sontag), a “sensible cognition” (Largier 2010, 536) that gives shape to value(s). Regard enables us to *recognize* objects, people, ideas, and concepts that are exemplary, not just “held close” but “held out” to view, for others. But exemplary of what? An aesthetic, in the sense of the beautiful or the good? Or, more artlessly, in the sense of touching and being touched?

We can regard forms of evil, particularly when such forms become visible by expression or act; indeed sometimes we cannot help but see, or are even forced to look. But regard cannot be forced in those ways. Regard requires intention, a willingness to look carefully, with patience, toward a critical estimation of that expression or act. In that sense, holding something in regard need not suggest “esteem”; “estimation” is more apt. Holding something “in regard” can mean holding it in esteem, but our evaluation may change, or be forced to be reconsidered, reestimated, revalued, according to terms that are unstable. As Margaret Atwood’s reluctant heroine, Offred, puts it in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, “context is all” (1985, 190). Offred, a prisoner of a modern theocracy, should know. When one can only see the world through glimpses, without either the time or the space for sustained attention and for understanding relationships of self to other or of here to elsewhere, regard is impossible.

In *Terra Critica* each of us shares a commitment to *relationality*, which calls for perceiving, describing, advocating for, and dwelling in difference, particularly with regard to our selves and others. Which calls, in other words, for critique. In a critical context, regard, as an embodied, sensible cognition, is not only aesthetic work but political and ethical work as well, for all these world-**perspectives** feed into the processes of estimation. Regard thus engages us in a *visual ethics*. Kaja Silverman proposes (in *The Threshold of the Visible World*) that an ethics of vision is “an

active gift of love” conferred by the eye “upon bodies which have long been accustomed to neglect and disdain” (1996, 219). Regard is, as Silverman proposes, a gesture of generosity. Only in the performance of these gestures – small and large, individual or national or international – do we even think of making productive “a human society that wasn’t just disgust” (180), as Jeanette Winterson puts it in *The Stone Gods*. Disgust is a kind of embodied opposition to regard; it makes us turn away from the sight, even from the presence of the object of disgust. A human society that “wasn’t just disgust” is one that is committed to turning toward one another. Similarly, Hélène Cixous also wonders “what a completely different couple relationship would be like, what a love that was more than merely a cover for, a veil of, war would be like” (1981, 44).

This “love,” or what I prefer to call “imaginative sympathy,” is the relational incentive of regard, and it might even be the ethical core of the “work” in the active sense, of art. As Sontag writes, a work of art must be “an extension of my sympathies to other selves, other domains, other dreams, other wor[ld]s, other territories” (2007, 147). I and Thou. By acknowledging, welcoming, and regarding the differences, “the strange(r)” even, in ourselves and in others, we can think again about an *economy of regard*, a moral economy that assumes the possibility of relationality, not the likelihood of division. Regard points toward the importance of **response-ability**. As Mieke Bal observes, looking is “also a mediation between collective and individual, between culture and subject” – a “form of socialization” (1997, 61). Regard is that and more: the recognition and visualizing of something exemplary to be shared.

In his work on heterotopias, Tobin Siebers extends Cixous’s speculation, imagining such a community as “[rivaling] any worldly republic ... that can be realized on the strength of the desire for community inspired by its very imagination. It is not a pure community – one purified of conflicting interests – but a community with many different stories” (1995, 19–20). The

124 willingness to listen to these stories is, itself, a gesture of regard, opening social relationships to the kind of hospitality that welcomes community based on difference rather than sameness, conversation rather than compliance. Toni Morrison calls this an “endless work” (1997, 316): of dwelling among networks of affiliations; of extending hospitality toward a **vision** of community that becomes itself a kind of living, desiring entity; a corporation based not on an economy of calculation but an economy of regard. An economy of regard is related not to mastery and the production of sameness, but to the **play** of difference, diversity, and heterogeneity. Not a simple transaction of one thing for another, but an inter-action, an engagement, between equal (equally regarded) agents. Such a moral economy drives the (hetero)**utopian** vision of community and citizenship that Siebers pursues. We can also associate this economy with care ethics theory that “views the self as a being immersed in a network of relationships with others” (Benhabib 1992, 149).

Finally, this definition of regard invites us to extend our regard to the nonhuman, the “object” of general disregard. An economy of regard must be also ecological, an extended relationality that, too, is maintained through generous gestures of (self-)critique and care that come from seeing the other. Attending to what we see, regarding it, allows us to “articulate the psychic and aesthetic conditions under which we might be carried away from both ideality and the self, and situated in an identificatory relation to despised bodies” (Silverman 1996, 2). Through this “sensible cognition,” which involves the body’s and the brain’s critical faculties, we might approach an economy of regard in which ecosystems might profit. An economy of regard frankly contradicts the dominant economy of profit and financial accounts. An economy of regard would require a different accounting. Not of simple “exchange,” but of much more complex transaction, its currency, as noted above, in the generous gesture. Regard is a sustained commitment to the kind of critique that intensifies sensible cognition interacting with imaginative sympathy, which

is necessary (but not sufficient) for co-creating conditions for moral maturity. As Sontag observed at her acceptance speech for The Jerusalem Prize (2000), "I think there is no culture (using the term normatively) without a standard of altruism, of regard for others" (2007, 147).

References

- Atwood, Margaret. (1985) 1998. *The Handmaid's Tale*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Bal, Mieke. 1997. "Looking at Love: An Ethics of Vision" (book review) *Diacritics* 27 (1): 59-72.
- Benhabib, Seyla. 1992. *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Cixous, Hélène. 1981. "Castration or Decapitation." *Signs* 7 (1): 41-55.
- Harper, Douglas. "Guard." *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Accessed November 22, 2015. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/guard>.
- Harper, Douglas. "Regard." *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Accessed November 22, 2015. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/regard>.
- Largier, Niklaus. 2010. "The Plasticity of the Soul: Mystical Darkness, Touch, and Aesthetic Experience." *Modern Language Notes (MLN)* 125 (3): 536-551.
- Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. 2003. 11th ed. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster.
- Morrison, Toni. 1997. *Paradise*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Regarding Susan Sontag*. 2014. Film directed and produced by Nancy Kates. Question Why Films.
- Siebers, Tobin. 1995. *Heterotopia: Postmodern Utopia and the Body Politic*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press.
- Silverman, Kaja. 1996. *The Threshold of the Visible World*. London: Routledge.
- Sontag, Susan. 2007. *At the Same Time: Essays and Speeches*. Edited by Paolo Dilonardo and Anne Jump. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux.