Deborah Nelson
Tough Enough: Arbus, Arendt, Didion, McCarthy, Sontag, Weil
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Reviewed by Carolyn Korsmeyer, 2020

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Quote:
"Nelson's picture of powerful thinkers with theoretical commitments to hard reality offers a thought-provoking counter-balance to the current emphasis on subjectivity and the emotions."

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Deborah Nelson examines the lives and ideas of six women who were intellectually influential in the late twentieth century: Simone Weil, Hannah Arendt, Mary McCarthy, Susan Sontag, Diane Arbus, and Joan Didion. They were united in character, for they were avowedly *unsentimental*, often to an extreme that made them less than endearing. Although the scope of their interests differed, they all sought to expunge sympathetic emotions from their approaches to events, thereby achieving clarity about whatever "realities" they pursued. Since those realities centered on misfortune and suffering, their studied emotional distance seemed to their many critics to be cold and heartless, lacking the empathy that is required to understand affliction. Nelson finds them not heartless but *tough.* In her words,

> they constitute a countertradition that has been mistaken for heartlessness and coldness. But it is, in fact, something else altogether, something I call toughness. They were drawn to suffering as a problem to be explored and yet remained deeply suspicious of its attractions. . . . They sought not relief from pain but heightened sensitivity to what they called "reality." (7–8)

Current philosophy of emotion and its incorporation into ethics, aesthetics, and epistemology is particularly out of step with the idea that only by suppressing emotion can one see reality clearly. Therefore, Nelson's study is especially interesting as a counterpoint to present assumptions. In addition, it provides the feminist philosopher with some unsettling ideas that demand reflection, for all these women were ambivalent or hostile to feminism, not least because of its ethos of emotional solidarity (11).

The book opens with a useful introduction that surveys aspects of the modern debate over the virtues of sentimentality (fellow feeling in the face of suffering and adversity) versus unsentimentality (quashing strong emotions that might occlude the truth). For Weil and Arendt, distance from emotion was a deeply considered theoretical principle about the way that feelings cloud understanding. For McCarthy, Sontag, and Didion, unsentimentality was adopted as a necessary communicative style of writing; a similar view influenced Arbus's photography.

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Nelson devotes separate chapters to each, a prudent approach because their ways of being unsentimental vary considerably. The individual chapters also provide illuminating contexts regarding the intellectual and social climates in which they worked.

Nelson begins with Simone Weil, a Jewish convert to Christianity with first-hand acquaintance with fascism in Europe and who surely was the most extreme personality of the lot. Weil was devoutly religious, tending toward the mystical, and she was also political to the core. These allegiances may appear paradoxical, but Nelson relates the various aspects of Weil's thinking to her "tragic" approach to suffering.

The presentation of Weil's philosophy and its perplexed reception in the United States is especially helpful in understanding this odd and enigmatic woman. By the time her work appeared in English (Mary McCarthy was an early translator), both the Cold War and social misogyny reigned. Weil's rejection of sentimentality in order to think clearly about politics and values was idiosyncratic, not to mention unfeminine. She considered indulgence in emotion to be an escape from the truths of inevitable suffering. For Weil, "suffering imposed reality on the mind, which was all too given to avoiding reality altogether" (23). Her consistency is brutal: "In order for reality to penetrate, the sufferer must not be consoled" (43). Weil also rejects the projection of the writer's self into her philosophy. Rather, erasure of the self is the way to bring insight into what is real. This is one more respect in which her unsentimentality is out of step with contemporary feminist thinking, in which acknowledgment of one's subject position has become virtually required in the presentation of ideas. But for Weil, attention to oneself only hinders access to what is true.

The other woman who experienced the war in Europe first-hand is Hannah Arendt, whose unsentimental "coldness" was especially excoriated in her articles about the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961, later published as *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Again, Nelson's reminder of the climate of the time helps the reader comprehend why Arendt's analysis of the notorious Nazi war criminal dismayed and outraged her readers. In the raw aftermath of the war, especially among her Jewish friends and colleagues, her stress on the ordinariness of evil--its famous "banality"--seemed to trivialize his wickedness. This was far from Arendt's own analysis, for her philosophical point was profound: it is the absence of *thinking* itself that leads a person--even an ordinary person—to commit unspeakable acts. And she believed it crucial to avoid extravagant emotional involvement in order to grasp the wickedness that issues from a failure to think. She too, considered the suppression of outrage and sympathy to be indispensable for moral insight and political effectiveness because of their overwhelming power over clear thought. "Heartlessness would therefore be a necessary component of Arendt's most fundamental charge to her readers: face reality" (51). Arendt explored and elaborated this attachment to reality as a necessary foundation for moral wisdom in her work thereafter, including the monumental *Life of the Mind*, posthumously brought to press by her friend, Mary McCarthy.

The relationship of Arendt and McCarthy began with stubborn dislike. An opening anecdote vividly presents them both on an empty subway platform after a late meeting of the board of a journal. They had not spoken for six years. Fed up with the awkwardness, McCarthy marched up to Arendt and proposed they end their animosity, and a lasting friendship commenced.

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The two women shared not only similar views about the need for forthright investigation of difficult political facts, they were willing to face the sharp criticisms of their peers and to stand alone, sometimes as virtual pariahs. Nelson says that "their contrariness…was on a deeper level a commitment to being disrupted and self-alienated, to changing and being changed, through their painful encounters with reality" (73). They both regarded sympathetic emotions for others--more theoretically, for the Other--as diversions from facing reality. "Since reality and the Other cannot be faced at the same time, McCarthy and Arendt chose to face reality, however psychically wounding" (74).

McCarthy, a journalist and novelist, approached her work with what she considered an aesthetics of the "fact." Facts not only permit clear perception of reality, they force an individual to change and hence are essential moral prompts. Kinder emotions, including group feelings of solidarity, have an "anaesthetic" effect that blunts critical attention to tempting allegiances. Ideological solidarity in whatever form provides a deceptively soothing community of fellow feeling (76). Suspicion of ideological cohesion was one of the factors that prevented all six of these women from commitments to feminism; extending that thought, it is easy to imagine how they would have responded to hashtag politics.

The chapter on Susan Sontag opens with an epigraph from her book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*: "So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence" (96). This view is at the core of Sontag's approach to art and cultural criticism: "She understood aesthetics as a tool not merely of apprehension and knowledge…but also of feeling management. The capacity to *feel* more sensually was the antidote to feeling too much or too little emotion" (98). Emotions cloud one's agency and recognition of responsibility, and in that respect they are "anaesthetic" because they get in the way of real *feeling*. As an antidote to flabby, unregulated emotions, Sontag (cryptically, in my view) advocates that one *sense* more directly. "Feelings get in the way of feeling (seeing, hearing, touching), which is to say they are anaesthetic or, when not properly managed, can be" (99).

Sontag is famous for exploring what later would be termed a politics of the body, partly in her work on pornography but even more in her essays about her own cancer, published in *Illness as Metaphor*. She combined her analysis of illness with her criticism of the Vietnam war, but she was also critical of antiwar activists. Again, exaggerated emotions occlude honest confrontations with reality, and emotionality blunts agency in both politics and personal self-knowledge (119).

One might think that a collection of six pariah cultural critics would reveal solidarity among them. This was not always the case, as was especially dramatic when Sontag published a highly critical review of Diane Arbus's 1972 retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. Arbus was a photographer, not a writer, and her famous pictures of subjects who are socially marginal and who appear odd, bewildered, or downright freakish have raised objections on many fronts. For the photographer herself, however, her pictures were designed to catch their subjects at moments where the "gap" between their intended self-presentation and the realities of the ways they appear to others was most revelatory (127). This gap reveals the lack of agency that

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afflicts us all. According to Nelson, Arbus sought to detach her own feelings from her particular notion of the feeling of the camera--the device that would bring the realities of subjects into view (125). She rejected the potential of photographs to "aestheticize" their subjects, that is, to disguise fact with a veil of beauty. Empathy is not the way to see others truly; rather, the camera presents pictures free from the distortions of compassion. Arbus herself remarked, "I really believe that there are things which nobody would see unless I photographed them" (134).

Joan Didion's version of unsentimentality mandates an undecorated style of writing that strives never to succumb to self-pity. This dictum was severely challenged when she wrote about the sudden death of her husband and the loss of her daughter less than a year later. An advocate of what came to be known as the New Journalism, Didion (unlike Weil) considered it obligatory to put the writer at the center of a story in order not to fall into the "false claims of omniscient objectivity" (148). Nonetheless, her emotional state as author was never to enter into her reportage, and she mistrusted sympathetic engagement in herself or others. She adopted irony and moral hardness as a method of both analysis and writing style, and she was relentless in targeting social movements that validated feeling, whether antiwar activism or the woman's movement. Didion's adherence to emotional hardness was put to the test with the loss of those she most loved, and she finally softened and granted the importance, not of lament and self-pity, but of "emotional self-reflection" (170).

The book ends with the chapter on Didion; there is no coda that reflects on the similarities and differences of these six women. I would have appreciated that addition, although it is possible that Nelson has deliberately left readers to draw their own conclusions. Certainly, there is much to think about in this book—especially for feminists, because to contemplate how six women of such honesty and intellectual power would have forsworn the movement is unsettling. Whether their admirable "toughness" is a culprit is worth consideration.

At any rate, Nelson's choice of these six provides an illuminating picture of women willing to think for themselves and live against the grain. Those who are unfamiliar with them will learn a great deal, and those who read them long ago will find here a useful refresher course. Nelson's style is succinct and clear, and the book is enjoyable to read. That said, philosophers will probably be a bit frustrated by some gaps in her analysis. Although the core of the toughness of these women has to do with their attitudes toward emotions and other affective states, there is little examination of the nature of emotions themselves. There is now a rich lode of emotion theory available, much of it by philosophers, and some consultation of this work could have deepened the account of their famous "coldness" as well as provided some important critical leverage. For example, despite their differences, all six are united in their adherence to "reality" as the core of their moral theory, their politics, and their aesthetic style. Yet it is a virtual consensus among emotion theorists that aspects of reality go unnoticed without affective engagement, since emotions are especially designed to register values of both personal and communal importance. Moreover, many ethical theorists express a similar attachment to reality to ground moral insight but without abandoning emotional experience; Iris Murdoch is one who comes to mind.

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Despite this criticism, Nelson's picture of powerful thinkers with theoretical commitments to hard reality offers a thought-provoking counter-balance to the current emphasis on subjectivity and the emotions. Weil, Arendt, McCarthy, Sontag, Arbus, and Didion never sought an easy escape from their critics. Their resolute stands against adverse opinions invites us to reflect carefully on our own positions, and Deborah Nelson is to be thanked for bringing them to our notice.

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