

A reader-response approach
to Susan Sontag's Death Kit

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A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Department: English
Major: English (Literature)

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa

1988

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
PREFACE	iii
INTRODUCTION: SOME APPROACHES TO READING	1
CHAPTER ONE: <u>THE BENEFACTOR</u> : PROLOGUE TO <u>DEATH KIT</u>	8
CHAPTER TWO: THE NARRATIVE VOICE IN <u>DEATH KIT</u>	34
CHAPTER THREE: WORDS AND TOUCH IN <u>DEATH KIT</u>	43
CHAPTER FOUR: <u>DEATH KIT</u> AS A FOUR-ACT PLAY	62
CONCLUSION	70
WORKS CITED	74

PREFACE

I did not come to reader-response criticism because I understood it to be of importance to my critical methodology; it was, instead, suggested to me, and as I seemed to be in need of a label to lend legitimacy and focus to my reading of Death Kit, I latched on to it. As an approach to reading, it offers enough open-endedness to allow me to roam its continuum picking and choosing as I please. I have used Jane Tompkins' Reader-Response Criticism From Formalism to Post-Structuralism, a collection of essays by reader-based critics, as a catalyst for a self-examination of my reading of Death Kit. After reading these essays and writing about Sontag's novels, I see my reading of those books as heavily influenced by New Criticism. This is not surprising, for it had a firm hold in the academy when I was first introduced to literary study on a university level in the 1960s. Prior to my reading of the Tompkins' anthology, I'd had a graduate seminar in the work of Stanley Cavell whose critical approach is certainly reader-based. I had also been impressed, and I think influenced, by Jean-Paul Sartre's essay "Why Write?", which is concerned with the writer's relationship to the reader, from the writer's point of view more than the critic-reader's. In the pages which follow, I attempt to set forth my version of the reader/writer relationship as instanced chiefly in my own reading of Susan Sontag's Death Kit.

INTRODUCTION: SOME APPROACHES TO READING

In "Why Write?" Sartre speaks of the reader's relationship to the text in the following terms: "for the reader all is to do and all is already done" (Criticism, 534). Both a reader-response critic and a New critic would, I think, agree with this statement. The work is on the page, in the reader's hands, and in this sense is "done"; the base from which the responding reader will create the "literary object" is also already done. Again from Sartre:

The literary object has no other substance than the reader's subjectivity. Raskolnikov's waiting is my waiting which I lend him (533).

For the New critic, what the reader must do is closely attend to the text, for the text is, for the New critic, sovereign. But the text is also multi-faceted so the text can take a New critic-reader in any number of directions; it is the text, though, that does the taking. For the Reader-Response critic, the reader is the one who does "the taking," who's in charge of a direction a reading takes. It is, perhaps, the self-consciousness of the reader-response approach which, at first glance, sets it apart from New Criticism. As Sartre says, "Raskolnikov's waiting is my waiting which I lend him." Not the text's waiting but the reader's.

It is the "reader's subjectivity" which, for Sartre, must do "all" there "is to do." I am in only partial agreement with this view; my disagreement is concerned with the state of the reader's mind, in relation to a given text, before the reader actually begins the act of reading. For myself as a reader, a work which has been accepted into the literary canon by those of taste, those who possess the proper qualifications for

deciding whether or not a text is a literary text, is, by that acceptance, granted its status as literature. For instance, I first accepted the literariness of Moby Dick, including the detailed whaling industry sections, because those qualified to say such things told me it was a great literary work. Over the years, the scope of my concept of "proper qualifications" has broadened, for I have also accepted works as literature on the word of those without literary training. For example, I came to Kenneth Patchen's The Journal of Albion Moonlight as a work of literature on the word of a blues harmonica player whom I'd known and respected for years. I no doubt could find a person with literary training who would speak of the Patchen book as an important literary work. My point here is simply that subjectivity is not, as Sartre maintains, the only "substance" for a given "literary object." The word of others, even if my choice of whose words to pay heed is necessarily subjective, plays a significant role in my view of what is and is not literature.

Whether Nietzsche, Camus, Sartre, Cioran, and Sontag are literary or philosophical figures is a question which seems to fascinate some critics in a way that it fails to fascinate me. So, when I came across Elizabeth W. Bruss' Beautiful Theories: The Spectacle of Discourse in Contemporary Criticism and found that some critics have denied the literariness of Sontag's novels, I immediately disagreed but did not find the question of sufficient importance to address explicitly. Death Kit had, more than a decade ago, been recommended to me by a fellow devotee of the work of William S. Burroughs. It has, since that time, been in a memory-file as a

literary work I would someday read; Don Quixote is in the same file. For me, the power of experience and human contact, which established Kit as a literary work worthy of my attention, is of greater import than a critical discourse which too often sounds of jargon. I also feel that what to call, by way of naming or classifying, what is between the covers of Sontag's books takes a distant second in importance to what is actually between those covers by way of content.

Through a close reading of the texts I make what I believe are valid connections between various aspects of these texts; these connections incorporate work other than the Sontag novels or writing about those novels. My connection of her novels to the philosophical (some would and do call them literary) concepts of Nietzsche, Freud, Artaud, the later Heidegger, and William H. Gass is born of my own philosophical-literary concerns as well as those of Sontag. It is in what these connections, within and beyond the text, produce that I find myself able to plug into the Reader-Response Criticism anthology.

In his essay, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," in the Tompkins collection, Wolfgang Iser presents what he refers to as the "gestalt" of the literary text:

The gestalt is not the true meaning of the text; at best, it is a configurative meaning; "comprehension is an individual act of seeing-things-together, and only that." With a literary text such comprehension is inseparable from the reader's expectations, and where we have expectations, there too we have one of the most potent weapons in a writer's armory--illusion (59).

Does going beyond the text--the text which for the "New" critics is objective--make the act of criticism not only more exciting but more

problematic? Iser does not directly address this question, but it seems to me the answer is yes. The reader, according to Iser, will attempt to "impose a consistent pattern on the text" but "discrepancies are bound to arise" (64). He says that interpretation attempts to avoid discrepancies, thereby creating them. For Iser, it is these discrepancies which draw the reader into the text: "compelling us to conduct a creative examination not only of the text but also of ourselves" (59).

"Gestalt" is born of what Iser refers to as the reader's need for "consistency." It seems to me that Holland's "unity," in "Unity Identity Text Self" in the Tompkins anthology, is closely akin to Iser's "consistency." For Iser, the reader must be actively and creatively engaged. Holland's reader is also engaged, active:

The unity we find in literary texts is impregnated with the identity that finds that unity. This is simply to say that my reading of a certain literary work will differ from yours or his or hers (123).

Holland's use of the word "identity" is especially important here as the following passage makes clear.

The individual can accept the literary work only to the extent he exactly recreates with it a verbal form of his own particular pattern of defense mechanisms and, in a broader sense, the particular system of adaptive strategies that he keeps between himself and the world. This matching is therefore crucial (125).

This is a life-as-a-battleground view of the reader's need to identify with the literary text. It is grounded, I think constructively, in "the common" as Cavell might use the term. By "the common" I mean those activities which compose the grind of day-to-day life, civilization as Freud speaks of it in Civilization and Its Discontents. Civilization

is itself the problem for both Freud and Holland. Holland's reader is Freud's civilized man; his essay is, with the exception of Georges Poulet's, at a point further removed from the New critics than any of the other essays in the Tompkins' anthology.

The contemporary feel of Kit, despite the fact that the novel is more than two decades old and is the product of a time quite different from the one we now inhabit, makes the passage from Holland particularly relevant. Holland is acutely aware of the struggle of the self/the individual; his approach to criticism has a decidedly therapeutic quality; this quality leads him to concerns similar to those of Sontag. Holland's psychoanalytic criticism, like David Bleich's subjective criticism, has "the practical goal," as Jane Tompkins writes, of achieving "knowledge of the self, of its relation to other selves, to the world, and to human knowledge in general" (xix).

Let me set forth now the four major areas of my discussion of Death Kit while putting in nutshell-form their most important points:

(1) The Benefactor and Death Kit are companion pieces. Here I've tried to accomplish the following: (a) to put some text-based interpretive flesh on the view of Tony Tanner and Cary Nelson (the latter by way of a note on William Burroughs' work in The Incarnate Word [228n]) that Sontag's novels are companion pieces; (b) to come to an understanding of the relationship of Hippolyte's dreams to Diddy's reality; (c) to examine the question of the madman as distinct from the eccentric as that question relates to Diddy and Hippolyte.

(2) The narrative voice in Kit or, at least, my reading of that voice is the key which opens the novel. Without it, Kit presents me with a less than complete picture. The first-person "I" and the narrative use of the second-person "our, us, we" point to Diddy as being the narrator as well as the protagonist. For the text to seem "complete," I have created a scenario which owes a debt to Stanley Cavell and Jean-Paul Sartre. But, it was the text and my experience that spawned this scenario while my reaching out to Cavell and Sartre is a self-conscious reaching towards some kind of critical legitimacy.

(3) The relationship of touch and words in Kit lays the foundation for a protest against civilization's approach to myths, if not the myths themselves; it sets the stage for the work of Antonin Artaud. It is in relation to the touch-word theme that we see, perhaps most clearly, how totally Diddy is trapped by western culture. The implications of the touch-word theme, in relation to interaction between the genders, are, though I've chosen not to explore the area as fully as I might have, wide-ranging and important.

(4) Looking at Kit as a four-act play opens the door for my understanding of Hester. It also helps clarify Diddy's addiction to the heroic and his quest for honor. This addiction prevents him from fulfilling the potential for liberation which the Artaudian-like theater of his second encounter with "Incardona" makes possible.

Like Holland, Iser, Bleich, Cavell, and Sartre, I leave the text when my individual experience, knowledge, and needs call for my leaving the words on the page. In fact in the conclusion of this paper I create a

scenario which, while inspired by the text, steps well beyond the printed words of Death Kit.

CHAPTER ONE: THE BENEFACTOR: PROLOGUE TO DEATH KIT

In choosing what aspects to focus on in my reading of The Benefactor as a prologue to Death Kit, I have made primary that which Tony Tanner pronounced important: Benefactor and Kit are companion pieces. He writes:

Hippolyte, the narrator of Susan Sontag's The Benefactor says, "I am crawling through the tunnel of myself," and both her novels are about the interior journeying suggested by this recurring metaphor (264).

Tanner, however, looks at this "journeying," as does Cary Nelson, from a long-shot rather than a close-up point of view. Both critics focus their concern on the implications of Diddy's journey deeper and deeper into his own head. The plot is, for Tanner, "nominal"; the relationship of words and touch which I examine at some length is, for him, simply a part of Diddy's journey, one aspect of "the long crawl into the tunnel (or shell) of self" (266). The point which for him is most important can be seen in the following question: "What shall it profit a man if he shall gain his head, and lose the whole world?" (268). Cary Nelson is, on this point, in agreement with Tanner, though he relates Diddy's submersion in his own head to death with a line from the novel itself: "Death=being completely inside one's own head" (310-311). Both critics feel that Diddy renounces the objective world in favor of a "world" of his own making; for Tanner the journey towards this subjective destination is begun by Hippolyte. While I do not reject the validity of these views, a central concern of my reading of Sontag's novels is the particulars of the plot which they view as secondary.

Benefactor is a novel written in the fashion of an autobiography, yet, as the narrator points out, it is not autobiographical:

You will observe that this effort to describe my dreams--dare I consider it an autobiographical novel?--has omitted my life; or perhaps it is the other way round (266).

The life of the narrator, Hippolyte, is the life of a man in his mid-sixties; a man living alone whose preoccupation (his dreams? his life? his self?) has surrounded and overtaken him:

If only I could explain to you how changed I am since those days! Changed yet still the same, but now I can view my old preoccupation with a calm eye.... Now, instead of being inside me, my preoccupation is a house in which I live; in which I live, more or less comfortably, roaming from room to room. Some winters I don't turn on the heat. Then I stay in one room, warmly wrapped in my leather coat, sweaters, boots, and muffler, and recall those agitated days (1).

Having placed himself in the present, the point in time from which this story is narrated, the narrator wastes no time informing the reader of his "unremarkable" origins. Hippolyte had a "somewhat premature taste for solitude"; he sums up his childhood in the following manner:

I did well at school, played with other children, flirted with young girls and brought them presents, made love to the maid, wrote little stories--in short filled my life with the activities normal for my class and age.... I managed to pass among relatives as a somber but likeable child (2).

Hippolyte's first major discovery, that he has as little in common with the people he meets in the city as those he had known in his rural hometown, comes when he goes off to university. (Hippolyte, like Daddy, has made the transition from small town to big city life.) The narrator informs us that the university is located in a city that "certain words

and the names of local institutions" will identify. During Hippolyte's university years, which take place between the two world wars, the descriptions of the city and major concerns of the intelligentsia, such as the arts, revolution, sexual freedom, and the search for new values, make it difficult to say whether the action is taking place in Paris or Berlin. Later in the narrative, it is reasonably certain the setting is occupied Paris during the Second World War.

During his student days, Hippolyte's ravenous hunger for knowledge is only partially appeased. He studies for three years before publishing his one and only philosophical article: an article of "important ideas on a topic of no great importance" (4); this publication provoked controversy and discussion in "the general literary world." It was through this single article that Hippolyte "was admitted to the circle of a middle-aged couple, foreign born and newly rich, who had an estate in the suburbs and collected stimulating people" (4). Hippolyte is acutely aware of a need to find himself philosophically:

I knew that entering the estate of manhood meant purchasing a set of more or less permanent opinions, yet I found this more difficult than others apparently did (5).

His father, a wealthy businessman, informs him that his older brother has fulfilled the father's dreams for his son, so Hippolyte can do as he pleases with a comfortable spending allowance and his father's blessings. Hippolyte takes advantage of this opportunity for self-contemplation. He informs the reader that he is a secular intellectual whose method of reasoning is reductionist. His concern with "certitude" brings Descartes to mind:

While I was occupied with my initial investigations into what I vaguely thought of as "certitude," I felt obliged to reconsider all opinions which were presented me (9).

Note that Hippolyte's academic philosophical training would certainly have included the study of Descartes through whom we can see a desire for certainty wedded to a skepticism which, for some, is extreme.

Hippolyte the narrator addresses, when speaking of truth, the question of the word and its power: a question which plays a central role in my reading of Death Kit:

Perhaps it would be easier for people to care about the truth if they understood that truth only exists when they tell it.... The truth is always something that is told, not something that is known. If there were no speaking or writing, there would be no truth about anything. There would only be what is (11).

Hippolyte tells the reader he has no trouble reporting events as they occurred; it is the rhetorical aspect of putting words to paper that gives him pain, makes him cautious: "the truth in the more pretentious sense, truth in the sense of insisting, rousing, convincing, changing another" (11). It is, then, the rhetoric of truth which is most problematic for Hippolyte. He draws a distinction between the lessons of his life "suited only for me, to be followed only by me," and the truth of his life: "only for someone else." The truth, then, according to Hippolyte, of the writer's work is not for the writer but the reader. The truth, as well as the possibilities for manipulation, inherent in this idea causes me to reconsider the epistemological implications of works such as Sartre's Nausea, John Berger's A Painter of Our Time, Rainer Maria Rilke's The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge.

Part of Hippolyte's caution towards the rhetoric of truth is born of his feeling that the writer "must allow the reader his liberty, his liberty to contradict what is written, his liberty to be distracted by alternatives" (12). This attitude towards the reader echoes what Sartre, quoting Jean Genet, calls "the author's politeness towards the reader":

The writer should not seek to overwhelm; otherwise he is in contradiction with himself; if he wishes to make demands he must propose only the task to be fulfilled. Hence, the character of pure presentation which appears essential to the work of art. The reader must be able to make a certain aesthetic withdrawal (Criticism, 536).

I disagree with Sartre's assessment of the writer's aims and the reader's needs that is set forth in this passage, but I wish, nonetheless, to focus on its opening two clauses. It seems to me that they provide a basis for contrasting the narrator of Kit with the narrator of Benefactor. It is my contention that the narrator in the 1963 novel does not attempt to "overwhelm" the reader and is not "in contradiction with himself" while the narrator of the 1967 novel cannot help but "overwhelm" the reader because "he," the narrator, is "overwhelmed" and, therefore, in "contradiction" with himself at the deepest level.

Looking at the Benefactor we note that it is written in the first person; this first-person voice causes a line from Cary Nelson's short discussion of Kit in The Incarnate Word to surface: "Susan Sontag once remarked that she would like to understand her need to write in the third person" (18). It is my contention that Death Kit is not, in any complete sense, a narrative which can be labeled first, second, or third person. While Benefactor pretends to be a first-person narrative, it is in fact a

third-person narrative. If we look at Benefactor's first-person persona with a certain literary sensibility, we can see that the "I" of this novel is as foreign to Sontag's true self, at least with regard to events that take place, as the word "I" was said by Rimbaud to be foreign to his true self. The truth of what happens in the novel is, in a variety of ways, reminiscent of the life-myth and intellectual concerns of William S. Burroughs. For one who knows about the circle of young, brilliant students who gathered around Burroughs in the 1940s, the fictional setting of Hippolyte's university days quite easily becomes New York City near Columbia University, where Sontag taught while writing The Benefactor. Whether Sontag was, at the time, aware of the Burroughs as mentor/Burroughs as junkie life-myth I do not know, but she was, we know, familiar with his work. She deals with that work in an essay, "The Aesthetics of Silence," that came out the same year as Death Kit--1967.

Let us pursue the Burroughs connection by attending to The Benefactor; Jean-Jacques is a writer and member of the aforementioned circle of "stimulating people" presided over by Frau Anders. The character of Jean-Jacques pulls in elements of Genet and Camus as well as Burroughs. Jean-Jacques who, like Burroughs, is homosexual, introduces Hippolyte to Genet's street world of thieves and male whores. Like Camus, Jean-Jacques had once been a boxer. Hippolyte's introduction to street life parallels Burroughs' introduction, by Herbert Huncke, to a similar, NYC based world. But, the Burroughs-Huncke connection also brought Burroughs together with morphine. It began Burroughs' sixteen-year submersion in morphine. At the time of his introduction to Huncke and

morphine, Burroughs was married. A few years later, in 1951, while Joan and William Burroughs and Herbert Huncke were living together, Burroughs accidentally shot and killed his wife. Burroughs subsequently took an extended journey into solitude and isolation from everyone and everything but morphine. It is, of course, a murder (real or imagined) which lies at the heart of Death Kit; it is, likewise, a murder that involves a threesome: Diddy, Hester, and Incardona. I present this information not because I intend to read Sontag's novels as being directly concerned with the life-myth of William S. Burroughs. I present this information because I have been, for the past fifteen or so years, an avid Burroughs fan. I've read each new novel as soon as it appeared in paperback and reread Naked Lunch and The Soft Machine several times. I am also aware that Sontag and Burroughs have been friends since at least the mid-1970s. My interest in and reading of Burroughs make me, as a reader, more acutely aware of the autobiographical particulars mentioned above and the thematic bond between his work and Sontag's. They are both concerned with consciousness, knowledge and its limits, and healing; both writers rather straightforwardly seek cures in the tradition of Nietzsche, Artaud, and the later writings of Heidegger.

* * *

Let me make use of a passage from The Benefactor as the starting point for a discussion that will radiate outward, like the circles created by a pebble thrown into a pond. The passage is a verbal exchange between Jean-Jacques and Hippolyte:

"One should always be submerged. But never in one thing." He paused. "Now doesn't that sound like a rule?" I acknowledged that it did.

"But it isn't, it needn't be. Imagine that submergence is not a rule or a vow on which you act, making you diversify your tastes and affections, but something you discover each day about yourself. Each day you--rather, I--discover that I am engrossed, submerged, in something or someone" (66).

Both Diddy and Hippolyte become submerged in one thing. Hippolyte submerges himself in his "preoccupation," in solitude; I read this as a submersion in the self. Diddy is, likewise, submerged in himself, but his submersion is that of drowning while Hippolyte's is that of diving so as to explore. Hippolyte never loses sight of others; it is this fact which makes Benefactor "a human-all-too-human" quest for self-understanding and cure. While Death Kit is equally concerned with spiritual-emotional healing, Diddy the narrator is too "submerged" within himself to be truly concerned with others.

Let us follow the path of submersion into what I think can be called the heart of The Benefactor. The theme surfaces next in an exchange between Hippolyte and Frau Anders; the first line of the dialogue is hers:

"Oh, yes. I forgive anything that is beautiful."

"I don't see why we should praise beauty," I replied thoughtfully. "We should allow ourselves to find beautiful anything which holds our complete attention--those things, and only those things, no matter how disfigured and terrifying."

"In short," she said quizzically, "the only thing you admire is what preoccupies you."

"I admire the preoccupying. I respect the preoccupied."

"Nothing else! Where is love? Fear? Remorse?"

"Nothing else" (114).

If we look at this quote in relation to the exchange between Jean-Jacques and Hippolyte, we see Hippolyte revolting against his male mentor; he shows himself to be a "man" by the rules for attaining manhood as he himself understands them. The opinion he sets before his female mentor sounds "permanent" enough to be included in that aforementioned "set of...opinions" required for "manhood." It is not difficult to imagine Hippolyte standing straight, looking out the window, off into space as he delivers these lines, wanting and needing to impress Frau Anders. If Jean-Jacques and Frau Anders are not only his male and female mentors respectively but are also his spiritual-psychic father and mother, then Hippolyte's sexual encounters with these two characters bring incest into the picture on that spiritual-psychic level that both of Sontag's novels are so fond of. An incestuous component fits nicely within Hippolyte's amoral view of the world. Hippolyte's world is a world where all is permitted, a world beyond good and evil. The question of what preoccupies one takes a backseat to the feeling, the sensation of being preoccupied. It doesn't matter what one is "preoccupied" with or "submerged" in so long as one is "submerged." The absoluteness of Hippolyte's words reminds the reader that we are reading the memoirs of Hippolyte the old man whose first sentence ("If only I could explain to you how changed I am since those days!") makes this absoluteness of the young Hippolyte seem laughable, absurd, yet, at least for this reader, quite human.

The next stop on the path of submersion draws not on dialogue but on the narrator's thoughts about his dreams:

So it occurred to me that in order to extract the most from my dreams, it was better never to have learned to interpret them. I wanted to enact my dreams, not simply observe them. And that was what I had done.

A total attention was all that was required. In a state of total attention, there are no dark corners, no sensations or shapes that repel, nothing that seems soiled. In a state of total attention, there is no place for interpretation or self-justification or propaganda on behalf of the self and its revolutions. In a state of total attention, there is no need to convince anyone of anything. There is no need to share, to persuade, or to claim. In a state of total attention, there is silence. And sometimes, murder (145).

For anyone familiar with Death Kit, this passage certainly sets off buzzers. For anyone familiar with Kit knows that while "a state of total attention" can bring forth both "silence" and "murder," it does not remove all the "dark corners" or "sensations" or "shapes that repel." Diddy, as absorbed as he is by the time of his second encounter with "Incardona," is never able to shed his "need to convince" Hester. Hippolyte's dreams have no small bearing on Diddy's relationship to Hester and Incardona; this being the case, let us look now at Hippolyte's first dream. In looking at this dream, and later ones, we find that the theme of submersion is always near at hand.

The second chapter of Benefactor introduces Hippolyte's dreams; he attempts to use these dreams as vehicles for greater self-understanding and healing. If philosophy left him obsessed with rational analysis and conscious thought, his dreams propelled him in the opposite direction; his first dream sets the stage for much that is to come in both Benefactor and Kit:

I dreamed that I was in a narrow room which had no windows, only a small door about thirty centimeters high. I wanted to leave and bent down. When I saw that I could not squeeze through the door, I was ashamed that someone might see me conducting such an investigation into the obvious. There were several chains hanging from the wall, each of which terminated in a large metal band. I tried to fasten one of the chains first to some part of my body, but the band was too big for either my hand or my foot and too small for my head. I was in some prison, although apart from the chains the room did not have the appearance of a cell (13-14).

Note that the "bands" don't fit, but he wastes no time trying them on.

There is a trap door in the ceiling through which a large man "in a one piece bathing suit of black wool" enters (14). The man has a limp but is quite agile otherwise. The man orders Hippolyte to dance. Hippolyte refuses, asking why he should dance. The man replies, "Because in this room he dances" to which Hippolyte responds, "But I am not he.... I am Hippolyte, a student at the university, but I do not dance" (14). The man makes a "threatening gesture," and Hippolyte wonders why he wants to watch a "clumsy man dance." The man, who is carrying a flute, uses the instrument as a weapon to strike Hippolyte on the calf of the leg. Does Hippolyte want to leave the room, asks the man. The reply: "Can't he leave, if he doesn't dance?" (15). The man hits the narrator in the mouth with his flute. The narrator, with his eyes closed and his mouth full of blood, prostrates himself before the man, expecting the worst. He opens his eyes to see a woman "dressed in something long and white, like a communion dress or a wedding gown" (15). Or, maybe a hospital gown?

I could not keep from staring at her, but I knew my gaze was discontinuous, broken, composed of hundreds of frozen gazes, with a tiny interval between each as long as the gaze itself. What interrupted my

gaze--the black intervals between the frames, as it were--was the consciousness of something loose in my mouth, and of a painful swelling of my face, which I feared to know more about, as one fears to look at oneself because one doesn't want to discover one is naked (15).

I wish to make two points about this passage, both of which relate directly to Death Kit: (1) Note the description of his gaze, his vision, in this stare he cannot control. It brings to mind film (especially "between the frames as it were") and the vision of a housefly. We see, in Kit, in an otherwise realistic scene with Myra Incardona, Diddy's vision go haywire in a manner different from this yet, equally as removed from normal vision as this. (2) The close description of his vision when staring at the woman and the distracting pain caused by the flute wielding man bring Hester and Incardona to mind. Hester is blind, and Diddy's metaphorical "vision," though it is no fault of Hester's, is, during the period of his submersion in Hester, profoundly discontinuous. It is, of course, the memory of Incardona, like the pain and swelling inflicted by the man in the dream, that interrupts Diddy's absorption in Hester. The possibility of dream and reality being easily confused seems to add to the relevance of this dream's relationship to Death Kit:

By mid-afternoon, I suspected that the dream had, so to speak, interpreted itself. Or even, that this morning of mental sluggishness was the real dream, of which the scenes in the two rooms were the interpretation (17).

The woman tells Hippolyte the chains are for him, and he "hastily" takes off his shoes; the chains fit now, and she chains him up.

"Why do you like me?" she asked. She was sitting opposite me in another chair. I explained to her that it was because she didn't make me do anything

that I didn't want to do. But as I said this, I wondered if it were so.

"Then there's no need for me to like you," she replied. "Your passion for me will maintain both of us here happily."

I tried to think of a tactful way of telling her that I was happy but that I still wanted to leave. I was happier with her than I had been in the company of the man with the flute. The chains felt like bracelets. But my mouth was sore, my feet were perspiring, and my gaze, I knew was insincere (16-17).

The damage done by the man in the bathing suit negates Hippolyte's happiness as the memory/damage done by Incardona negates Diddy's possible happiness. In both instances, it is, of course, the mind of the protagonist that stands in the way of his happiness.

The narrator asks the woman if he might kiss her; she slaps his face, laughing: "You must learn to take things before you ask...and dance before you are bidden, and surrender your shoes, and compose your face" (17). The narrator asks her to explain herself; she gives no answer. With the intent of taking her sexually, he throws himself upon her "and at that very moment awoke. I got out of bed in a state of elation" (17).

It seems to me that this dream is calculated to induce a pop culture, knee jerk version of Freudian dream analysis. I will not, however, center my discussion on the Freudian approach. By not centering my discussion on a Freudian approach, I am not implying that my view of this dream is not influenced by Freud; he is ever present: in a certain sense he, like Incardona in relation to Diddy, haunts my view of this dream. In fact, a critic submerged in the Freudian approach might see my view of Hippolyte's first dream as a "pop culture knee jerk" version of Freud.

When we look at the first character Hippolyte encounters in his first dream, we see that it's "a large man"; the man is dressed in a "black" one-piece bathing suit. If the reader is familiar with only The Benefactor, the man's attire may be of little interest. If, however, the reader is familiar with Death Kit, the man in the "black wool one piece bathing suit" can easily bring Incardona to mind. When the man in the bathing suit says "Because in this room he dances" (14), one who is familiar with Death Kit can easily hear: "Because in this tunnel he murders (or acts out murder)." In this first dream, Hippolyte proclaims that he doesn't dance, yet he does, eventually, dance. In fact, by the time he does dance, he is joyous of the opportunity to obey:

I thought of how I might repay the bather for his kindness. "I will give you all my money, all that I possess," I said. "You shall tell me what to do. I will obey you in everything. I will be your slave."
 "He runs," said the bather. "This is his first command."

Glad to be able to obey at last, I jumped off the stage and ran down the aisle as fast as I could (185).

Note that in the first dream, when Hippolyte is given orders, they are in the dream "room" described earlier. But now, when he obeys, they are on a stage. Likewise, in my reading of Kit, the tunnel which is analogous to the dream "room" in the dream's first section, the bather section, becomes a stage at the novel's conclusion.

In the dream's second section, the section in which he encounters the woman in white, the chains which would not fit Hippolyte when the dream began now fit comfortably. When the woman says, "Your passion for me will

maintain both of us here happily" (16), we get a glimpse of what Diddy hoped would be true of his relationship with Hester.

It is my contention that the "room" of this first dream is the train tunnel, in relation to the bather as Incardona, and Diddy's apartment, in relation to the woman in white as Hester. Let us look at the parallel between Hippolyte's situation with the dream "woman in white" and Diddy's situation with Hester. Hippolyte is unable to tell the woman that his happiness does not prevent him from wanting to leave:

I was happier with her than I had been in the company of the man with the flute. The chains felt like bracelets. But my mouth was sore, my feet were perspiring, and my gaze I knew was insincere (17).

Diddy is also happier with Hester than he had been with Incardona. That Hippolyte's words imply that he was happy to some small degree with the bather gives us some insight into the bizarre happiness which Incardona brings Diddy. His happiness with Hester does not keep him from taking to his bed and losing weight despite normal eating habits: "Now, no matter how much I eat and sleep, I get thinner and weaker every day" (276). Unlike Hippolyte, whose descriptions of both his dreams and his waking hours maintain a certain distance and reasonableness, Diddy is equally overwhelmed by reality and dream.

It is the woman in the dream who starts the fearful Hippolyte moving. She complains that he has soiled her dress and asks him to go. Likewise, Hester challenges Diddy to act. When he speaks of getting "thinner and weaker every day," she tells him to call a doctor:

"Let's call a doctor."
 "Hester, I'm not sick physically."
 "How do you know that?"

"I just do. I know what's wrong, why I'm sick."

"Why?"

Did he want to say it? Yes. "I think I'm sick because I'm afraid" (276).

Following this interchange, Hester challenges him to assert himself, to leave the child-having-a-tantrum stage he is caught in. Diddy accepts her challenge, and they enter the tunnel a second time; this trip into the train tunnel concludes the novel.

Hippolyte goes on to have several variations on his first dream. It is not until after he has sold Frau Anders to an Arab man that we get a dream which doesn't fit the pattern, a dream which terrifies him:

I was draining away and struggling to lean towards the right. It was then that I died. At least, it became completely dark.

"This dream is too heavy," I said to myself when I awoke.... Whenever I woke up still submerged in a dream, I would try to recover my equanimity as quickly as possible. It was not easy, for this dream told me all too painfully how burdened I was and how I despised myself (87).

The narrator of the dream is "draining away" because of a wound he has no memory of having received, much as Diddy is "draining away" from a cause of unknown origin. When he wakes up "still submerged in a dream," Hippolyte moves to shake it off, but he can't shake off himself. Frau Anders weighs upon Hippolyte as Incardona weighs upon Diddy. Might we assume that Diddy's sexual shortcomings with Joan, his ex-wife, planted the seed from which Incardona grew? We know that she was not satisfied with Diddy's performance as a lover, but he overcame his confidence in his lovemaking with Hester:

At first somewhat inhibited and, since Joan's tirades, holding a modest opinion of his talents in

bed, Diddy amazed to find himself graceful and almost tireless with Hester (272).

It seems to me that a Norman Holland-type of reading of Kit would be concerned with the possibility of Joan's role as a catalyst. I do not mean to imply that Joan's power as a catalyst is intentional; in fact, we have no way of knowing, or reason for thinking, that she is aware of her power. It is Diddy's response to her dissatisfaction that turns Joan into a catalyst. Holland's approach would, I think, concern itself with the possibility that Diddy's sexual failure with Joan sets in motion violent forces that his failure to take charge of Hester intensifies. It also seems likely that a traditional Freudian view of the Diddy-Hester-Incardona triangle would see Joan as the power which sets in motion the violent potential of that threesome. I here acknowledge such an approach, note its appeal and challenge, but move on to other considerations.

Continuing now with the theme of submersion, I will focus on Hippolyte's view of "proper self-love." This little section of The Benefactor has the look (by the way it is set up on the page) and feel of an academic philosophical argument. The reasoning of this argument is in four parts. Hippolyte begins with what he considers to be essential, a universal component of love:

The one criterion of love upon which all can agree is intensity. Love raises the temperature of the spirit; it is a kind of fever. Men love in order to feel alive. And not only love. This is also why they go to war (201).

The passage above brings to mind Freud's "Reflections upon War and Death" from the collection Character and Culture (edited, interestingly enough, by Sontag's ex-husband Philip Rieff): "intense love and intense

hate are...often to be found together in the same person. Psychoanalysis adds that the conflicting feelings not infrequently have the same person for their object" (114). Hippolyte goes on to speak of hatred's role in Freud's conflict; I find his view of hatred a helpful clarification of Freud.

For Hippolyte, love fails, and the reason for its failure is its desire for "incorporation":

The lover does not seek a beloved, only a bigger self. But thereby he adds to his own burden. He now carries the other person too (114).

Diddy's love for Hester is certainly a quest for a bigger self, but Diddy's situation takes its own twist on Hippolyte's view of "burden." Diddy desires an increase of his "burden" at least in a physical-material sense. Diddy desires the physical-material "burden" of taking care of his beloved. He hopes that this "burden" will lessen the cerebral-psychic burden of Incardona. This parallels Hippolyte's actions: Hippolyte devotes himself to his fatally ill young wife in hopes of easing his psychic-cerebral burden in the form of Frau Anders. But Hester does not allow herself to be the "burden" Diddy had hoped she would be; Diddy is forced, therefore, to face the psychic-cerebral burden of Incardona. Hester's strength here provides an instance with which I can take a first step into a disagreement with Cary Nelson on Hester's power in Kit. He writes in The Incarnate Word: Literature as Verbal Space:

But gradually Diddy discovers that his perceptions can perfectly shape Hester to suit his needs. She is actually a spectrum of dolls he can choose from. The hard, unyielding, "opaque side of Hester" (279), the persistently intrusive object-doll, may be

discarded by the side of the tracks in his private tunnel (20).

Nelson has lifted Hester and Diddy's trip into the tunnel out of reality; Hester is "a spectrum of dolls" in Diddy's "private tunnel." I read Kit as a basically realistic novel up until the point where Diddy enters the "museum" of the dead. If Erich Auerbach in MIMESIS: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature can read Woolf's To the Lighthouse as realism, I see no reason why Death Kit cannot be similarly read. If we make such a reading of the novel, we must face the, I think, real possibility that Diddy, though unable to admit it to himself, does indeed murder or, at least, accidentally kill Hester in a public train tunnel. This is, in effect, her punishment for being stronger than Diddy. So strong that she uses him to accomplish her own suicide? I focus on Hester in my discussion of Kit as a play and will continue this discussion there.

Hippolyte presents his view of love's relationship with hate:

One possible solution to love is hate. In hating, we push the burden aside. But then we are left diminished, weighing half the amount we have become accustomed to (201).

Diddy takes to his bed, hating himself. He begins, as mentioned earlier, losing weight despite the fact that he is eating normally. The metaphorical in Hippolyte's words becomes literal in Diddy's life; the relationship of the metaphorical to the literal is, of course, analogous to the relationship of dream and reality which is a central concern of both Benefactor and Kit.

Hippolyte recommends detachment over loving or hating: "The better solution is detachment--neither loving nor hating others, neither assuming

burdens nor laying them down" (201). Diddy is unable to be detached; he is, I think, incapable of detachment. I see his inability to be detached as a function of the fact that he has been overwhelmed. Diddy the narrator like Diddy the character, the protagonist in Death Kit, is overwhelmed. The distance required for detachment is not within Diddy's grasp. This fact manifests itself not only in the action but also in the narration of Kit. Hippolyte is capable of detachment and finally resorts to it by choosing solitude.

Hippolyte's "second line of reasoning" informs us that "love impedes our ability to remain separate" and that "true vigor results only from the knowledge of separateness." For Hippolyte:

Every change of emotion we experience as a momentary invigoration. But this flush of feeling is deceptive. It is the prelude to a tapering off of vigor, which sets in when we realize the dependence of our feeling on someone or something external to ourselves (203).

This passage helps to explain why Hippolyte is, at the conclusion of Benefactor, "enjoying" his solitude. I think it also helps explain why Diddy must lash out at Incardona and, possibly, Hester as well. The "momentary invigoration" is, as Hippolyte points out, "deceptive," so when Diddy's "vigor" doesn't just taper off but begins a fall towards death itself, Diddy strikes out against those on whom his feelings are dependent. Diddy must kill either Incardona or Hester. In order to kill Incardona, Diddy must resurrect him, and the text is reasonably clear that such is accomplished. On the question of Hester's fate, it leaves us hanging:

Hester fell back from his arms. Can she have fainted? Anxiously, he puts his cheek to her breast and listens to her breathing: the slow, regular inhalation and exhalation of someone deeply exhausted, who's mercifully fallen into a vast, much needed sleep. Asleep, then. Let her rest (291).

Can the reader believe what Diddy says he hears in this passage? During the fight with Incardona, Diddy is confused about what he hears, and what he sees leaves me wondering whether Hester is dead or alive:

Hester's head, which he'd set against the shelter wall, has already slumped down in an awkward-looking position that must be uncomfortable. And the hard wall must hurt her spine. She'll ache when she wakes up (291-92).

Is this concern for Hester a function of "Diddy the Good"? "Diddy the Good" is the first Diddy the narrator presents to the reader. This Diddy needs to see himself as "Good"; this "Good" Diddy is, at least so far as the narrator is concerned, false. Such being the case, can we believe what this Diddy says it hears? Can we believe its concern for Hester's comfort? Are the words--"Asleep, then. Let her rest"--simply a manipulation of words, a way of comforting not Hester but Diddy? We do after all often refer to the dead as sleeping and at rest, and with such phrases we seek to comfort ourselves rather than the deceased. If, as I contend, Diddy the narrator is overwhelmed, he could not bear to face the truth of what he has done. Instead, he falls back on "Diddy and Good." For the only way Diddy can love himself is to deceive himself.

Hippolyte's third point of reasoning deals explicitly with the theme of submersion: "I think best when I think one thing, feel most deeply when I feel one thing" (203). This line takes us back to the exchange between Jean-Jacques and Hippolyte from which I began my discussion of the

submersion theme. Hippolyte speaks of being either huge or tiny; he says he prefers being tiny. In his discussion of the "two great passions" of his "nature," we can see that he is submerged in, preoccupied by, himself:

There are two great passions in my nature. I like to concentrate on some small problem, and I like to be surprised. But nobody is as small as I am. And nobody surprises me as much as I do (204).

Diddy is not capable of the distance required to make such a statement. He is overwhelmed by himself; none of his problems are small because he is so small his problems can only be large. They lay upon him like "a huge, flat stone."

Let me attempt a more insightful reading of the above quoted passage by zeroing in on its Nietzschean implications. Let us consider the following from Thus Spoke Zarathustra:

I walk among this people and I keep my eyes open: they have become smaller, and they are becoming smaller and smaller; but this is due to their doctrine of happiness and virtue. For they are modest in virtue, too—because they want contentment. But only a modest virtue gets along with contentment (281).

In my view, Hippolyte understands that the "doctrine of happiness and virtue" has made people "smaller." He acknowledges this understanding, and his contentment with it, when he says "nobody is as small as I am." His response to the power of this "doctrine" is solitude, and based on a "modest virtue" within this solitude Hippolyte finds "contentment." (Hippolyte's assertion that no one is as small as he is, is of course, anything but modest.) Hippolyte is able, he has the inner resources required, to put this "doctrine" at a distance. He is able to make the "doctrine" itself "smaller"; it does not, as is the case with Diddy,

overwhelm Hippolyte. "Diddy the Good," on the other hand, demands a virtue that is anything but "modest." He cannot come to grips with the "doctrine" in order that he might overcome or transcend its power. Are the contrasting attitudes of Diddy and Hippolyte a function of their respective positions in society? Is Diddy's commonplaceness what leaves him incapable of overcoming/transcending the "doctrine" as Hippolyte's eccentric-artistic outsider status allows him to come to terms with the "doctrine"? This question will be addressed more fully in a later section of this paper.

Hippolyte's fourth and final line of reasoning examines the question of goodness, of being good:

Man strives to be good; being bad is just the name for some people's goodness. The essence of goodness is monotony. Note, please, that I say monotony--not consistency, which so many incorrectly hold to be the sine qua non of good character. From monotony comes purity. This is why marriage to one woman is better, purer than polygamy. But monogamy is polygamous, when matched against the purity of self-love (204-205).

Hippolyte takes the terms "polygamous" and "monogamy" to a deeper, more inward, level than the level of normal use. "Normally" is a key word here, for, in a very real sense, it is the normality of Diddy's mind-set, his beliefs with regard to good and evil, that entrap and enslave him. Hippolyte is, on the other hand, able to step further inside himself in dealing with these basic, commonplace concepts (i.e., polygamy and monogamy); he arrives at a new, more profoundly individual, truth. Once again, Diddy is too overwhelmed, too submerged in the commonplace to be capable of such a step. His journey into himself is controlled by the

"doctrine of happiness and virtue" spoken of by Nietzsche. Nietzsche's own personal struggles come to mind when, near the end of The Benefactor's concluding chapter, Hippolyte notes the similarity of the madman and the eccentric. I will end my discussion of Benefactor's relationship to Death Kit with an examination of this madman-eccentric motif.

What I have already said about Hippolyte's concept of "proper self-love" is certainly in line with the Hippolyte as eccentric and Diddy as madman argument which I intend to make. Hippolyte writes:

The issue of my sanity cannot be easily dismissed, but after long consideration of the matter, I hold that I was not insane. The acts of the eccentric and the madman may well be the same. But the eccentric has made a choice, while the insane person has not; rather, he is abandoned to his choices, submerged in them (272).

Is not Diddy "abandoned to his choices, submerged in them"? He acts in order to surface, but his choice of a blind witness frustrates this act, which is an act of theater (i.e., the killing of the second worker). Diddy then retreats or journeys onward into the museum of the dead; death is not, of course, a matter of choice for madman, eccentric, or anybody else. Death becomes Diddy's final adviser; as Hippolyte chose to reflect while awaiting death with a certain contented "enjoyment," Diddy avoided real choices by going straight to death for his answers.

In Diddy the madman we can see a cause of madness which is not visible in the passage quoted directly above: fear. Diddy is mortally afraid. From the very beginning of their relationship, his fears drive him to Hester as they also cause him to envy her blindness:

The girl again extends her hand to Diddy to lead her. His eyes smart with gratitude for that gesture

of trust. Of course, when one is blind one is compelled to trust everyone. Or no one, Diddy wished he had fewer alternatives like the blind girl (27).

Diddy fears the large number of choices that being able to see gives him. In the following passage, it's the large number of choices that bothers him. This too brings forth his envy of Hester's blindness:

If Hester can't see the ugliness, it's possible that after a while, he'll be unable to see it, too. How fine that would be. Simply not to see. Garbage trucks, bums, neon signs, gutters, plastic toys, parking lots, unhappy children. Automats, old women on the benches of the traffic islands on upper Broadway (225).

Diddy the madman is submerged in choices out of fear. He finally faces his fear and decides, after securing Hester's word that she will accompany him, to act. This act, through his own choice of a blind woman as a witness and Hester's refusal to submerge herself in his act of theater or fantasy, does not bring him satisfaction; it is only when he abandons himself to death, about which none of us have a choice, that he finds some degree of satisfaction. Diddy is not able to put himself at a distance from his choices and is, therefore, unable to make choices which satisfy him. It is this matter of personal satisfaction which most separates Diddy from Hippolyte. Then, by analogy, can we say that Diddy is mad because he is not satisfied with himself and thinks himself insane? The difference then between the eccentric and the madman is this: the eccentric has a self-respect, born of a certain degree of personal satisfaction, that allows him to choose sanity.

In the preceding discussion of The Benefactor, Hippolyte's pursuit of, and desire for, solitude sets the stage for Diddy's push-pull attitude

towards solitude. While Hippolyte can handle solitude and even be happy in it, Diddy cannot; he craves it yet fears it. Hippolyte the eccentric is like a diver into the ocean; he will emerge and manage to float on the surface. Diddy the madman is not diving; he is plunging downward out of control, drowning. I have also opened the door for my discussion of Kit's narrative voice. The dynamic of this voice, or more accurately voices, attests to Diddy's unsuccessful struggle to come to the surface and stay afloat.

CHAPTER TWO: THE NARRATIVE VOICE IN DEATH KIT

While the narrator of Death Kit is most often perhaps in the third-person voice, Death Kit is, by no means, a third-person narrative in its entirety. On several significant occasions the narrative voice is in the second person. Shortly after Diddy kills Incardona for the first time, we get a third-person side by side with a second-person voice:

He has retraced his steps; when he reaches the third car from the end, mounted the train; passed along the corridors; regained the compartment. His compartment. Our compartment (25).

I read "Our compartment" as an admission that the narrator is in that compartment and, therefore, in the story. Nowhere in the novel is the reader given reason by the text to believe that any character but Diddy could possibly be the narrator. Again, this time in relation to Hester, we get the second-person voice: "The girl, being blind, has become a thing; discussed as if she weren't even present in our compartment" (42).

When the train reaches its destination, the narrator says, "Upon arriving at our common destination" (43), a neutral statement with regard to the narrator's identity that does not work against my view that Diddy is the narrator. The second-person "we" and "us" put the narrator in the car with his fellow workers and an Oriental chauffeur on the way to a business meeting. "Us" and "we" are present at the meeting itself: "Most of us were already seated at the oval table" (148). And "(Now) we were ready, the group complete" (168). And "We all look rather genial this morning" (191).

The only pattern I can see to Sontag's use of the second-person voice is this: it occurs in connection with Diddy's fellow travelers and fellow workers, but it does not occur in relation to Diddy and Hester as a couple. The narrator never makes use of we, us, or our when referring to the couple. The logic of this, indeed if it has a "logic" in the traditional sense, seems backwards. Why does the narrator link himself to those he is traveling with, though Hester is of course in that group, and those he works with, but not to his "beloved"? Kit is a narration of breakdown as the oneness of Dalton Harron breaks into three, two of whom I think are Diddy. In relation to Hester and her aunt, there are, at least, two instances in which the narrator seems to be talking to "himself"; we first see and hear the narrator talking to "himself" on the train and in the tunnel while Diddy is trying to deal with Incardona's body immediately after killing him. Let's start at the beginning of these talking-to-"himself" instances and see if, by looking at these occurrences chronologically, a pattern emerges.

The train, on which "Diddy the Good" is riding when the novel opens, breaks down and with it, at least for the narrator, the day:

From the instant the compartment went dark, no one spoke. We wanted to wait, to be in silence as well as darkness. Then, after an endurable pause, resume our desultory conversations on the far side of the tunnel at the exact point at which they'd broken off (14).

The "We" brings the reader to a halt, for it places the narrator on the train. This "we" is not long in resurfacing, and this time it is more intrusive:

Then, suddenly, the day failed. So did our conversation. Diddy remembered this tunnel two hours out of the city. But why didn't the lights in the compartment and the corridor go on? No? All right then (14).

For me, the statement about what Diddy remembered, followed by the question about the lights, then the rhetorical "No?" and the I-win "All right then" reads like a person having a fairly one-sided argument with him or herself. The "No?" doesn't have to be rhetorical to fit; if this "No?" is not rhetorical then one side of Diddy has had, in the passage quoted above, his memory severely questioned and been found lacking.

The talking-to-"himself" interchange which immediately follows Diddy killing Incardona for the first time presents another perspective:

What if Diddy drags the body a few steps back, where he can leave it in a sitting position against the front of the train? Done. Can't keep the upper torso, the part that's clothed in an undershirt, from slumping forward. Watch out! The body's about to keel over on its bare face (23).

In the first two sentences, one side of the narrative voice suggests a way of handling the dead body while the voice's other half does as the first voice suggests and announces its accomplishment: "Done." In what remains of this passage, one side of the narrative voice explains that the body tends to slump forward. The other half of the voice calls the explainer voice back to the action with "Watch out!" The explainer voice is so engrossed, as writing does engross one, in describing what is taking place that "he" must be brought back from the act of explaining-describing an act to the act itself. The clause about the "upper torso" and the clause which defines "upper torso" are, in my view, a concession by Diddy the narrator to the dead workman who might need upper torso defined. Diddy

doesn't want to talk over the dead man's head; Dalton Harron isn't that kind of man.

Immediately on the heels of Diddy disposing of the body, and for the first and only time, the narrator makes use of the first-person I:

All along, I thought it was my death I carried within myself. Like an interminable pregnancy which would nevertheless end one day, quite unpredictably. But it wasn't my death coming, it was someone else's. That's the Done-Done I always dreaded.

Guilt gives way to more fear. I'm closed in. Trapped. I was brought here to do this. Diddy has killed a dark man in a dark tunnel. Diddy the Stupefied has never felt more alive (24).

Is this usage of the first-person I a result of Diddy having never felt more alive? I think it is. I also think the declaration of which the "I" is the subject bears directly on the title "Death Kit." Death brings us to the surface, submerged as we are in the grind of the everyday, business-as-usual, commonplace of life. Likewise, fear, dread, and terror bring us to the surface, and those moments too produce the sensations which make us feel "more alive." The kit of life is in a certain sense a kit of death. While this is, as I claim Sontag's second novel to be, a decidedly dark vision, it is not an altogether spurious one. If we juxtapose this "I" passage with the conscious act of theater, the spectacle for a blind lady, that helps form the conclusion of Death Kit, we can I think see the novel in something akin to a hopeful light. We can, I think, understand something of Cary Nelson's viewpoint when he writes:

The resurrected workman, the liberated Hester--familiar and personalized figures--are Diddy's playmates in a magic world of infinite duplication (20).

Nelson sees this liberation through fantasy, which brings to my mind Marcuse's Essay on Liberation and Eros and Civilization, as being the result of the fact that by the conclusion of Kit Diddy "dwells exclusively in the huge world of his own head" (20).

If it is all in Diddy's head, then whether or not Hester is murdered or another workman for the railroad is murdered doesn't matter, for it is all a fantasy anyway. If the novel's ending is the final act of Death Kit "the play," the only act which for Diddy is a conscious act, an act of theater and nothing more, then the question of murder is of no more concern than it is on Nelson's view, for actors in plays don't really get murdered. But, Death Kit is soaked in the juices of unfulfilled desire and frustration-dissatisfaction to such a degree that it cannot give itself entirely to fantasy or theater. Diddy is, as Nelson points out and we must not forget, a commonplace man. I claim that he is chained to myths which overwhelm and thereby control him. This point is discussed more fully in the Death Kit-as-theater section of this paper. Let me continue now with my examination of those instances in which the narrator is talking to "himself."

In the passage quoted earlier, in which Diddy is dealing with the dead body of the workman, trying to keep it in a sitting position, an explainer voice and a doer voice seem to be working as a team, but in later passages the two voices are at odds. In attempting to understand this narrative voice that talks to itself, let us take a look at William H. Gass' essay, "On Talking to Oneself" as it appears in Habitations of the Word. Gass labels the two sides of the voice that talks to itself:

Still, we should remember that we comprise true Siamese twins, fastened by language and feeling, and better than any bed; because when we talk to ourselves we divide into the self which is all ear and the self which is all mouth. Yet which one of us is which? Does the same self do most of the talking while a second self soaks it up, or is there a real conversation (212)?

In Death Kit, the "all ear" or doer self is, in my view, more often at odds or disgusted with the "all mouth" or explainer voice, or vice-versa, than the two voices are in "real conversation." On one occasion the "ear" or doer voice seems to be crying out against the explainer or "mouth's" cautious, reasonable approach. The instance occurs when Diddy is thinking of a quick marriage to Hester:

This week. Or downtown, at City Hall, the day she was discharged. For that speed, he'd even put up with having Mrs. Nayburn as godmother and witness. But perhaps Hester wouldn't want to be rushed. Don't! Diddy would count himself blessed if she consented to live with him on a trial basis (187).

For me, the "Don't!" cries out, a single word against the intervention and domination of reason and good sense in the form of moderation. The "ear" or doer voice wants to be swept onward by the intensity of it all. When the "mouth" or explainer voice expresses caution--"But perhaps Hester wouldn't want to be rushed"--the "ear" or doer voice cries in protest "Don't!" as the explainer--"mouth" voice had cried "Watch out!" to the "ear" or doer that was handling the dead body of the workman. Or, was it the doer voice calling the explainer voice back to the action? We come face to face with Gass' question: "Yet which one of us is which?"

My last example of the narrator talking-to-"himself" directly relates to Gass' question. The extremely problematic nature of this question can

be seen in the following passage from Kit. Diddy has had dinner with Hester's aunt, Mrs. Nayburn:

Diddy let the taxi go in front of Mrs. Nayburn's rooming house. At their final goodnights, the new found tenderness for the woman flared up again. But quickly, quickly. "See you tomorrow, dear. And thanks for the lovely dinner." Faster. Diddy walks past the Institute (204).

Is the doer or "ear" voice prodding the explainer or "mouth" to keep the story moving so that Diddy can get back to the Institute in time to see Hester, or is the explainer or "mouth" voice simply prodding "himself"? There is also the possibility that the "mouth" or explainer voice-self has had quite enough of Mrs. Nayburn. Note that when Diddy's "new found tenderness for the woman flared up again" the explainer voice says "But quickly, quickly." The explainer or "mouth" self has had enough of the aunt and the effect she has had on the doer or "ear" self. The reader will see, in my discussion of words as opposed to touch, that for Diddy Mrs. Nayburn's words have a negative power. He tries to combat this power by engaging her in small talk. This strategy, and it clearly is a strategy in a sense that Norman Holland would appreciate, does not always work. When he allows the aunt's words to cause him to ignore her humanity, Diddy does himself further damage, for he adds to the guilt, which at this point in the plot, is beginning to crush at least one of the narrative voices.

In looking at the passage above, let me draw on what Holland has to say concerning the reader: "he constructs his characteristic way of achieving what he wishes and defeating what he fears" (125). If we replace Holland's reader with Diddy, we see that with Mrs. Nayburn, as

with Myra Incardona and Hester, Diddy's "characteristic way of achieving what he wishes and defeating what he fears" is not effective; in fact, it breaks down.

* * *

If the narrative voice in Kit is the voice of Diddy, as the use of the first-person "I" and second-person "we, our, and us" suggest that it is, then we can see that Dalton Harron is split in three. With this split at the front of our consciousness, let us look at the battle going on inside the protagonist within the following passage:

Diddy, like any animal, has two eyes. Let's suppose that one eye is diseased, or has been traumatized. That stands for Incardona's death, and its attendant enigmas. The other eye is a perfectly healthy organ. That one stands for his tie with Hester, and their deepening connection with each other. With this condition how could he have been such a fool? Foolish enough to expect one's clear-sighted eye can remain uncontaminated by the diseased one (160).

If we substitute two selves for "two eyes," we come face to face with the fact that, unlike the animals, Diddy has an unconscious and a conscious self, and this combination produces a third self which is forever with the other two selves. It is a self which stays at a distance; it is the self of civilization, a civilized self at its most civilized. The conscious self is also civilized but, being nearer the unconscious, its interaction with the unconscious makes it less pure than that third, more distant self. This brings to mind, I know, the id, ego, and super-ego triad as well it should for, as I said early on in this paper, the ghost of Freud is virtually always near at hand in my reading of Death Kit. In talking about this third voice I will make use of the term

super-ego. The super-ego-third voice or self comes to us in a purely third-person form; its distance from the action gives it an objective tone the squabbling second-person voice is incapable of presenting. Note that the second-person voice works as a team when dealing with the freshly killed worker; this collaboration spawns the narrative's only example of the first-person "I." So, a "dark man" killed "in a dark tunnel" spawns a metaphorically dark child--the narrative "I." This "I" is too full of "fear" and "guilt" to surface again as an I, in the first person. We get several instances of two voices within this I, the doer and explainer or "all ear" and "all mouth" voices, and the tensions between them, but much of the novel is the voice of the third self which wants to be objective but is usually critical of Diddy, critical that is of itself.

CHAPTER THREE: WORDS AND TOUCH IN DEATH KIT

The theme of word and touch, their opposition and complicity, runs through Death Kit like freeways through Los Angeles County. The narrator, in the third-person voice, puts touch and word in opposition to one another early on in the novel. Immediately following the first time Hester and Diddy make love, which of course is shortly after the first time Diddy kills the workman in the tunnel, we get the following passage:

How far apart they are (now), even in the tiny space of the lavatory. The gluey touch is forgotten, the damp hair, and the sweet rubbing and melting. Diddy has let that go, as a common thing, and stands behind his tray of words (35).

The immediacy with which Diddy resumes, once his body is separate from Hester's, his post behind "his tray of words" is emphasized by the "(now)." Sontag makes use of this device, this "(now)," throughout the novel. During my first reading of Kit, I found it distracting to the point of being irritating. But, during the second reading it added to the novel's sense of immediacy. Usually the "(now)" simply filled a space, serving the same function in a phrase or sentence that any now can be expected to serve. "(Now)" is often placed in a sentence where its context would not make it absolutely necessary. When the device is taken far enough, it almost confuses the issue by its very emphasis on time-immediacy: "Diddy could hear the dealer's irregular, heavy breathing--indication, even before the man spoke (now), of his alarm" (16). For me, this sentence seems to confuse the issue of time-immediacy by overemphasizing it. This is not, however, a typical usage of "(now)"; the first passage is more typical of Sontag's employment of the device; it

doesn't inject any confusion into the sentence it is used in or the passage as a whole. It works, for me, as an emphazizer; it emphasizes the continual movement of time. It also works as an alarm, like buzz words for some readers, only in my case this alarm, the series of "(now)"s that run like a highway through Death Kit, allows me to surface from the ocean of words. It brings me out of Kit and back to me in the act of reading.

To continue with the passage quoted above, I note that Diddy quickly shoves "his tray of words" between himself and the "damp...sweet" memory of touch. With the passage of time, his estrangement from that memory becomes even more pronounced. Diddy is now alone in his hotel room, trying to figure out what happened and why. He berates himself for confessing to a woman instead of the priest:

A priest is accustomed to receiving lurid confessions, and pledged to keeping them absolutely secret. And a priest can instruct the sinner on how to become innocent again, can tell him, Go, and sin no more. Not that Diddy could ever really believe in the literal validity of a priest's absolution. But it was at least more shapely, more definite than the vague informal quittance or release from his crime which he had sought in carnal intimacy with the girl. What a fool he'd been. Crawling back for the familiar tender indulgence of women (51).

Diddy is now hours removed from the touch in sex of Hester. What was quickly set aside "as a common thing" is now a flaw in his character, something to be ashamed of. Diddy immediately turned his and Hester's act, their physical coupling, into an abstraction; now he transforms that act into something which shows him to be less of a man than he should be. The sentence (above) about sublimation through sex sounds like the words of any "expensively educated" man of the late 20th century; it places

Hester and Diddy's act of fucking (and I use that word for its earthy, organic power at the other end of the spectrum from clinic-sounding abstractions) in a "supplementary" role. The flesh he had grasped is now a term, two words: "sexual intimacy." It is fitting that Diddy should berate himself for not turning to the priest, for the priest is, of course, officially connected to the word, the first and true word.

The flesh and its pleasures are immediately set aside as "common." With time and in solitude, they are renounced in favor of the word, even though Diddy cannot believe in the "literal validity" of the word in the form of a priest's absolution. So, is Diddy a typical "expensively educated, gently reared" man? Is he a typical "civilized" man? Let us juxtapose the opening of Kit and the two passages quoted above with the following from Freud's "Reflections upon War and Death" in mind. Freud is answering here the question or how one reaches "a higher plane of morality":

The first answer is sure to be: He is good and noble from his very birth, his very earliest beginnings. We need not consider this any further. A second answer will suggest that we are concerned with a developmental process, and will probably assume that this developmental process consists in eradicating from him the evil human tendencies and, under the influence of education and civilized environment, replacing them by good ones. From that standpoint it is certainly astonishing that evil should show itself to have such power in those that have been thus nurtured (113).

I read the "Diddy the Good" of the novel's opening sentence--"Diddy the Good was taking a business trip" (1)--as a nod through its fairy tale-like naming of the novel's protagonist towards Freud's "first answer," a nod exploded by Sontag as it is passed over by Freud. After

beginning with the fairy tale "Diddy the Good," Sontag ends the novel's first paragraph with "Himself, and childhood friends apart, the right name was Dalton" (1). The reader is then presented with a paragraph on Dalton Harron; this paragraph is the narrator's only extended mention of Dalton. The protagonist is referred to as Dalton by Hester, her aunt, and Diddy's fellow workers; his brother, Paul, and the narrator refer to the protagonist as Diddy:

Dalton Harron, in full: a mild fellow, gently reared in a middle-sized city in Pennsylvania and expensively educated. A good-natured child, the older son of civilized parents who had quietly died. (Now) a rather handsome man of thirty-three. Quieter than he once was. A little fussy, perhaps; somewhat sententious. Used to getting an answer when he spoke politely to someone, and never reconciled to the brutal manners of the metropolis in which (now) he lived. But unresentful. The sort of man who doesn't mistreat women, never loses his credit cards or breaks a plate while washing up, works conscientiously at his job, lends money to friends graciously, walks his dog at midnight no matter how tired he feels. The sort of man it's hard to dislike, and whom disaster avoids (2).

For me, this thumbnail character sketch reads like the opening paragraph of a feature article in the Sunday newspaper. It could in fact be the opening paragraph about the murder of a young blind woman and the subsequent suicide of her killer--Dalton Harron. The rest of the novel explodes the myth of Dalton Harron as presented in this paragraph.

Freud's "second answer" applies, I think, to why Diddy so readily sets aside the pleasures of touch, in this case through sex, in favor of words, why he goes on to berate himself for turning to the girl instead of the priest. Commonplace Diddy has placed sex, as society so commonly does, in the category of "evil human tendencies." If we think of the sex

act as the ultimate touch; then touch becomes evil. It is through the word that the sex act is transformed from what-is into the abstraction designated by the word. Diddy's actions bear fictional witness to the truth of the last sentence of the passage from Freud.

Diddy is sensitive to the overuse of words; this sensitivity is born, I think, of his respect for words, his belief in their importance. He is offended by the "constant talking" of Hester's aunt. It likewise offends Hester, but the aunt's touch acts as a balance in Hester and her aunt's relationship. The aunt is also able to make use of other people's words in a way that pleases Hester. Diddy asks Hester if she loves her aunt; she replies:

Oh, no. Not love. But I like things she does. Her constant talking is awful, but I like her touching me. And reading to me (38).

The aunt does not read to Diddy, and their relationship has no solid basis in touch. Diddy has to make a conscious, concentrated effort if his senses are to survive her "indiscriminate chatter":

But her aunt's indiscriminate chatter and his necessarily mechanical responses have muted Diddy's energies for perceiving, silenced his feelings, frozen the nerves that animate his flesh (89).

He runs into similar difficulties when he visits the widow of the workman he thinks he has killed. The widow, Myra Incardona, is doing all the talking, and the effect of her talk, her words, is not to mute his perception so much as to distort and hypnotize it. Diddy's vision goes wild, and Myra begins to grow in size; it is with his own words that Diddy is able to combat her growth:

As long as Diddy went on asking questions, Myra Incardona looked less mammoth in size. Empty words have their use after all (123).

Diddy finds safety in his questions; her answers are predictable:

To this question--and by (now), to many more--Diddy already knew what answer the woman would make. No solutions to his enigmas here. Each promising lead destined to be quickly overthrown (124).

It is at this point that Myra "reads" Diddy's mind; she says: "I know what you're trying to do. Put words in my mouth" (124). She's right of course. His questions are based on his certainty that he is reading her mind. Myra's accurate yet mistaken (he has entered her house under false pretenses, so she cannot be aware of his true motives) reading of Diddy's mind comes in the form of a cliché: "I know what you're trying to do. Put words in my mouth." I assume that clichés are, at least for Diddy, "empty words," so Myra's use of a cliché affirms "empty words have their use after all." To a critic concerned with Sontag's relationship with what Ihab Hassan has called "the literature of silence," this fictional encounter with the word might well be seen as a defense of the word, or at least an acknowledgement that the word is not inherently bad. Myra's words are, after all, as accurate as they are mistaken. It is Diddy's lying words which cause Myra to be mistaken; her words, insofar as they are the product of a consciousness that knows the man is up to something fishy, are accurate. Myra is angry and verbally attacks Diddy; at the end of her tirade Diddy says "I'm sorry" and the narrator informs the reader that he means it. Does his meaning these words ("I'm sorry"), which are so often made "empty" by their usage, further affirm that "empty words have their use after all"? Not so far as Myra's action is concerned:

"Myra didn't even seem to hear Diddy's words, but sailed on" (125).

Diddy's "I'm sorry" is ignored, but the positive power of words can be seen elsewhere in the novel.

Hester speaks positively of being blind, seeing it positively for perhaps the first time; the effect of her words on Diddy is profound:

Diddy, in his chair, feels her words as an immense blow. Though they take a few moments to traverse some unidentified distance. A good blow, like the harsh stroke of an osteopath knocking a dislocated shoulder into place. Not painful at first. The flow is moving out, in ever widening circles. (Now) Diddy feels--there's no other word for it--exact. Exactly where he is; being exactly where and how he wants to be. Can a few quiet words do that? Strip something away to permit this feeling, one he's never had before in his life? Not ever. Like being in the very center of something dense, surging, and resilient. In the center, but with no sense of being pressed in on all sides. A feeling of plenitude, instead. And of harrowing lucidity (156).

I read "something dense, surging, and resilient" as a mini-description of life, so Hester's words have enabled Diddy to feel at the center of life rather than confined or smothered by it. But this feeling is fleeting:

(Now) the blow, having rushed past him, already light years away, begins to ache. Tears rinse his eyes. Falling towards the mattress, the crown of his head against Hester's left thigh, Diddy comes undone (156).

It is in the nature of the spoken word to strike suddenly and to just as suddenly be gone. Diddy's "tray of words" is, in a very real sense, unnatural. While most of Diddy's references to the word focus on its relationship to speaking, the power of the "tray of words" transcends that relationship. It is that first explicit reference to the word--Diddy's "tray of words"--after Hester and Diddy first make love that hangs

ominously over the action of the novel. This "tray of words" is not fleeting; it is a sort of foundation or handbook for civilized living. I see this "tray of words" as functioning in a way strikingly similar to what Martin Heidegger, in "The Word of Nietzsche: God is Dead" from the collection The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays, refers to as "the encircling sphere":

The preservation of the level of power belonging to the will at any given time consists in the will's surrounding itself with an encircling sphere of that which it can reliably grasp at, each time, as something behind itself, in order on the basis of it to contend for its own security. That encircling sphere bounds off the constant reserve of what presences (ousia, in the everyday meaning of this term for the Greeks) that is immediately at the disposal of the will (83-84).

This "sphere," like Diddy's "tray of words," provides a basis for an ordering of the universe. This role makes it considerably more important than sensual act of touching. Diddy's "tray of words" bears the mark of "Enframing"; in the title essay of the Heidegger collection cited above we get the following:

But Enframing does not simply endanger man in his relationship to himself and to everything that is. As a destining, it banishes man into that kind of revealing which is an ordering (27).

When Diddy grasps but quickly loses the sensation of being at one with life--"being exactly where and how he wants to be"--it is the power of "Enframing" that undoes him. Heidegger writes:

The rule of Enframing threatens man with the possibility that it could be denied to him to enter into a more original revealing and hence to experience the call of a more primal truth (28).

While Diddy seems vaguely aware of the power this "Enframing" has over him, it is too strong for him to combat, a fact that at least one of Diddy the narrator's voices is aware of. The possibilities for liberation in the writings of Antonin Artaud, which are essential to my view of Kit as a four-act play, attempt to answer "the call of a more primal truth." In order to heed this call, Artaud turns from the culture of the West to the culture of the East. Diddy is not capable of so radical a shift in thought; his "tray of words" weighs him down. This "tray of words" does not allow Diddy access to Heidegger's "more original revealing"; Diddy is stuck in "that revealing which is an ordering."

In his "Science and Reflection," Heidegger tells us that "since the beginning of the modern period in the seventeenth century, the word 'real' has meant the same thing as 'certain'" (162). If the real is that which is certain, Diddy cannot do otherwise than become undone when Hester's words rush past him, for "the real" tells him that Hester's words—"Being blind does make one see better in a way. Nothing is either ugly or beautiful. When that's not of concern an awful lot of scum is blown off the mind and the feelings" (156)--are nothing but the romantic rationalizations of a blind person, metaphorically beautiful but in reality nonsense.

Let me pursue the connection between the "real" as a product of "Enframing" and Diddy's "tray of words" a bit further. While Hester is in the hospital, Diddy decides, since he knows she likes to be read to, to read Jane Austen's novels to her. It is his preoccupation with the ideal, a preoccupation nourished by his "tray of words" yet in opposition to what

the "tray" tells him is "real," that leads him to choose someone else's words:

Diddy's expressive baritone voice and his educated pronunciation bespeak an authority and compel a respect that Diddy the Whole, speaking his own words, is not always able to command. As do the abstract certainties about pleasure and discord proposed in the novels Diddy has chosen to read (210).

For me, Austen's words function in Death Kit as a component of Diddy's "tray of words" which he shoves between himself and the profound but "common" power of touch, particularly as it manifests itself in the sex act. This "tray of words" has formed "Diddy the Whole," but, in so doing, it has shrunk him, and now the reality which is his flesh and blood self is not equal to the "real" which Austen's words portray. The "abstract certainties" contained in Austen's words are, for the narrator, "outdated sentiments" and these "sentiments" are part of the "Enframing" which creates "a standing reserve" that constitutes the "real" and is powerful in a way that "Diddy the Whole" can never be. Like the "encircling sphere" of which Heidegger writes, Diddy's "tray of words," while meant to serve his (our) need of security and order, has overwhelmed-overpowered "Diddy the Whole," shrinking him as Nietzsche's Zarathustra describes the people being shrunk by "the doctrine of happiness and virtue." A crucial difference in the "encircling sphere" as opposed to the "tray of words" is that the words do not encircle us. They do not, therefore, make us as secure as the "sphere" on which the "will" can "immediately" draw, but, by the same token, the words cannot so entrap us as can the "encircling sphere." The question of whether or not the "complicity" of touch and

word that Diddy desires can be equated with "the encircling sphere" will have to be dealt with by someone else, for I turn now to other aspects of the word vs. touch theme in Death Kit.

While we can see a similarity in Diddy's usage of and attitude towards the word in his relations with Hester's aunt and Myra Incardona, his relationship to the only male he might call a friend, fellow worker Jim Allen, shows no explicit concern with the word. Diddy "wanted Jim Allen to feel easy with him, he wanted to be close to Hester" (68). He likewise wants Hester's aunt and Myra Incardona to feel at ease with him, but the obstacles he faces in achieving that ease are connected with an explicit concern with words on the part of the narrator. A similarly explicit concern is not a part of his dealings with Jim.

We know that Diddy is bored by talk about business. His job responsibilities are to be kept in their place, a predominately one-dimensional and unproblematic place, but Jim's talk about business is not represented to the reader as "boring words." His racist, stupid jokes, while noted by Diddy, do not distort or mute Diddy's perceptions; he "doesn't mind Jim's abrasive coarseness" (73). It is only within the confined space of a limousine with four other men that words are explicitly addressed:

Diddy felt himself to be under a different dispensation than the others. Exempted from tacking on to those indigestible strips of words being exchanged by the three men seated in a row to his left more strips of words; his words, which were bound to be sticky as taffy or tough like overchewed bubble gum. Allen, Katz, and What's-his-name, sitting side by side, sunk deep in the grey felt upholstery. Jim not perceptibly different from and no more human than the rest of the trio; and Diddy

no fonder of him than the others. Nothing remained. Mr. Dalton Harron in the jump seat maintains, always has maintained, exacting standards for personal relations, though life has promised him nothing. Knows that idle conversation of one with three cannot be, fully, the word-and-paper-clogged plenum of business, unswallowable but at least necessary or anyway justifiable. But it is already too many for real talk. One with three is a middle condition, serving nobody. The number precludes genuine nourishment, which is possible, when it's possible, with one. Only one other (72).

The difference between and/or similarity of the "empty words" of Hester's aunt or the widow Incardona and the "indigestible" and "sticky" words of Diddy's fellow workers doesn't interest me much. What does interest me is the "Mr. Dalton Harron." I read this as a further criticism by Diddy the narrator of the Dalton Harron described in the no-loose-ends paragraph quoted earlier in this paper. Dalton Harron may be his "real name," but the narrator does not see Dalton Harron as sovereign. Diddy the narrator knows that "Diddy the Good" is not Dalton Harron and possibly never was: "Dalton Harron is no longer Diddy the Good, if indeed he ever was" (166). The narrator is simply Diddy; the narrator will not concede sovereignty to Dalton Harron so far as "realness" is concerned. The "Mr." in "Mr. Dalton Harron" is, therefore, a mocking "Mr."

Since the narrator puts strict limits on the number of people allowed if "genuine nourishment" is to be had, let us briefly focus on "idle conversation" and its relationship to the number of people involved in it. The idea that "genuine nourishment, when possible at all, is only possible between two people is exploded later in the novel by the fact that Diddy is not nourished but rather ravaged by the one-to-one situation.

Hippolyte's view that "true vigor" is born of "separateness" comes to mind here: the one-to-one situation lends itself to a loss of "separateness"; whereas, a four-way conversation works, by its very numbers, to emphasize the separateness of the four individuals.

Even more than Diddy, Dalton is a product of "Enframing" for Dalton does not see the trap that "Enframing" can be; Diddy, on the other hand, knows, whether he cares to straightforwardly admit it or not, that he is caught. Diddy wants, while Dalton expects, the ideal that finds its ultimate expression in the idea of man and wife as one flesh, Hippolyte has rejected such a possibility. He is of the belief that "genuine nourishment" is found within the single, separate self.

Let us turn now to the power of touch. In a scene describing one of Diddy's visits to Hester in hospital, we see its power, without the aid of sex, to make "ordinary conversation" not painful but "soothing." He enters the room. Hester asks him not to speak; they embrace, then:

The dialogue of intimacy sustained, even when they begin to talk. Hester seems less guarded, enigmatic. Sitting upright (now); knees bent and drawn together, her spine curved like a bow. They are holding something like an ordinary conversation, the kind Diddy often finds insufferable, but which he finds soothing, reassuring (now) (113).

In my view, the setting of this "dialogue of intimacy," which allows "ordinary conversation" to be "soothing" rather than "insufferable," is of paramount importance. The setting is, of course, a hospital, and a hospital is not a place-space for sex; the work done here is in constant confrontation and/or conversation with the body, but it holds itself separate from the temptations of the flesh--at least it's supposed to.

Sex as an "evil tendency" is, in effect, barred from this space-place. Is it only by putting restraints on the potential of touch to become sexual activity that touch and words can work together in a "soothing" fashion? If this interaction can be labeled "genuine nourishment," must there always be restraints against pleasure-oriented-rather-than-procreation-oriented sex if such nourishment is to be had?

Let us attempt now to piece together the narrator's position with regard to touch. Touch is of profound importance in Diddy's relationship with blind Hester:

Hester seems to be looking at him.

As she did yesterday, she can direct toward an intelligent facsimile-look with movements of her head. But never real looking: an exiting from the head by means of sight, an exchange of looks, complicity with the eyes. The faces of the blind are not in dialogue with other faces as faces. Only with other faces as flesh. Touch, the sole complicity (89).

This is Diddy the narrator's speculation on blindness; close behind this passage we have Diddy trying to read Hester's expression:

Something stirs in her face. Around the mouth, that's where we must look. If for ordinary people the eyes rule the face, with blind people it must be the mouth. There was the complicity he sought. Not of eyes and looks. But of mouth and touch (90-91).

I wish to make two points in relation to these passages: (1) The use of the word "complicity" strikes me as significant. The word's association with accomplice as in a crime is of interest because Diddy and Hester are, of course, accomplices to murder. That she doesn't believe he has actually killed anyone does not change the fact that by not going to the police Hester is, under the law, an accomplice to murder. (2) The

mouth is, of course, the instrument with which we form spoken words; it is also what we use to taste. Diddy wants a complicity of "mouth and touch." Does Hester arrive at such a complicity when, after a long, intense argument, Hester uses her mouth, as a touching taster of things, to touch Diddy in such a way as to draw him away from words?

Hester has slipped farther down under the covers; is taking his sex in her mouth. Diddy groans, throws back the blanket, presses on the back of her head with his hand. She's devouring him, taking him inside her, pulling him toward her. Dragging him away from thinking, from memory, from words, from Paul. Let all that go, then. It doesn't matter. No, it does. But can wait until tomorrow (253).

Thus, touch can be an escape from, as well as obstacle to, thought and word. Touch is used here as a way to temporarily forget that which needs forgetting, but the narrator seems to talk "himself" out of letting "all that go" for good. Within the context of Death Kit, sexual touch is little more than a method or device by which we can temporarily forget and, thereby, reduce what Artaud refers to as the "cruelty" of life. It does not, like the "chatter" of Hester's aunt or Myra Incardona, simply mute or hypnotize; it, at least temporarily, erases the memory and evaporates the consciousness. Hester and Diddy reach a point where they are making love three or four times a day; it is at this time that the erasure-power of sex is addressed explicitly:

The vertigo of sex. The miniature frontal lobotomy that follows orgasm. Diddy drifting off, but not exactly into sleep. And sometimes wishing he dared to propose to Hester, Let's die together. Let's kill ourselves (now). While we're united and really happy (273).

The power of touch extends beyond actual flesh-against-flesh contact; it has the power, through its connection to sex and, I would assume, physical violence, to interfere with the word without making flesh-against-flesh contact:

The heat and moist odors flowing off her body had begun to suffuse Diddy's mind, blurring his thoughts, interposing a tense vapor between his ability to reason and the crystalline word-blocks stacked in his mouth and ready to be fired off (249).

It is shortly after this passage that Hester performs the act of fellatio that drags Diddy "away from thinking, from memory, from words." In short, Hester drags Diddy "away from" that on which reason and rational action are based. Is this good or bad, right or wrong? It is my view that Diddy the narrator cannot decide. It has already been established that Diddy has trouble making choices. The reader knows that Diddy's "tray of words" forms the bottom line for his responses to anything that happens, be it physical or mental. In connection with this "tray of words," which I read as that which a civilized person has immediately at hand when negotiating the twists and turns of life, we have light and darkness associated with word and touch respectively. It is, of course, a common practice for light and darkness to be used as symbols for good and evil. The connection here is Biblical, in a quirky kind of way. Diddy had, you will remember, berated himself for turning to Hester and sex, after the first encounter with the workman, instead of the priest and the word. The priest is, after all, a representative of the Bible's true word." It is my view that the Bible played a significant role in the development of Diddy's "tray of words." Let us look at two passages which, I think,

illustrate the Biblical implications of the word as opposed to touch theme and Sontag's mating of the word with light.

Diddy and Hester are about to make love in the darkness of his apartment when Paul arrives unannounced. Leaving Hester, Diddy goes out into the hall to his brother:

It takes a while for Diddy to get accustomed to the blow of light. His eyes smart, and he can't stop blinking. Meanwhile, Paul's talking (240).

Note that the power of light is linked to Paul's words, but, before I say more on the subject, let us look at a passage which specifically unites words and light:

Since that bitter row after Paul's unannounced visit, [Diddy] doesn't trust Hester; never will, in the old way, again. God knows, he wants to. But can't. Her words have scored him. Like the light that scored his eyes on the night Paul came, when Diddy first opened the door and peered into the hall (267).

The Biblical echoes are unmistakable here: the word as the truth, the way, and the light. From "Genesis," in The New International Version of The Holy Bible, we get the following: "God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light. God saw that the light was good and he separated the light from the darkness" (1). I mentioned above that the Biblical connection between Diddy's "tray of words" and Sontag's symbolic joining of the word with light is "quirky"; I mean by this that Paul, who is at no time portrayed as particularly spiritual, can be seen as something of an unannounced representative of the Lord shedding light on the lustful sin of Diddy's "Adam" and Hester's "Eve." Note that it is a combination of Hester's words and the light which accompanies Paul that "scores" Diddy.

Adam is first reproached by the Lord, or in this case His representative, then by his mate. In a certain sense, Paul leads the invasion of light on the darkness of Diddy's apartment. While Diddy is not a religious believer in any literal sense of the term, he does grant religion a significant power and pays it a certain respect. This respect, incorporated with the "tray of words" as a whole, plays, I think, an important role in said tray's power over Diddy.

The last point I wish to make with regard to the relationship of words and touch in Kit centers on a dialogue between Hester and Diddy which immediately precedes their entering the train tunnel in search of Incardona. This dialogue has theatrical overtones; it has the feel of lines-in-a-script:

"Do you remember what I was saying before you had to interrupt me and rush out to get the coffee? Do you remember, Hester?"

"Perfectly. You said you thought you weren't sick for a physical reason but because you were afraid."

"That's right. Now, do you know what you were then supposed to ask me with affectionate concern? Your next line?" A sullen impacted look settled on Hester's face. Diddy snapped his fingers. "Quick! Quick!"

"Say your line again," said Hester.

Diddy almost laughed. No point in browbeating her. Try to be patient. "Okay. My line was 'I'm afraid.'"

"Afraid of what?"

"Bravo!"

"I don't like this game."

"God damn it, it's not a game, Hester!"

"Yes, it is. But let's play...I'll play. I want to play. Look" (278).

The explicit theater contained in this dialogue, and Diddy's conviction that it is not a game but something quite real give us a glimpse of Death

Kit as theater. It opens the door to seeing the whole of the novel as a play. I have chosen to interpret Diddy and Hester's second trip into the train tunnel as the fourth and concluding act of Death Kit "the play." My discussion of all four acts of this "play," with particular attention being given to the final act, make up the next section of this paper.

CHAPTER FOUR: DEATH KIT AS A FOUR-ACT PLAY

I will describe the first three acts of this "play" as they relate to a better understanding of some of the novel's themes and in particular the character of Hester.

Act one takes place in the train tunnel in four scenes set, respectively, in the train compartment, the tunnel itself, the corridor of the train, and its lavatory. Note that even though the text does not speak of the lavatory being dark, it is, like the tunnel, "a secret place, a hiding place: lowly yet secure" (30). Act two is likewise in four scenes set in Hester's first hospital room, the apartment of Myra Incardona, the restaurant where Diddy and Mrs. Nayburn have a meal, and Hester's second hospital room. I see the two hospital rooms as setting the tone of this act; these rooms certainly offer a rather striking contrast to Diddy's house-of-mirrors type of visions in the Incardona apartment. Act three is one long scene containing protracted periods of silent darkness in which the audience, whose eyes have adjusted to the darkness, sees the darkened forms and hears the sounds of Hester and Diddy's lovemaking. While the dialogue in this act at times brings to mind Edward Albee, the darkness, silence, and use of non-word sounds and movement bring to mind Beckett and Artaud. The fourth act offers an alternative to the talky, psychological-type study of relationships made use of by Albee and the "nothing but voice" darkness of Beckett. William Gass, again from his essay "On Talking to Oneself," provides words which I feel speak to Diddy's situation and its relationship to modern drama:

Even if the world falls silent and we shrink in fear within ourselves...as though every syllable were subversive (as indeed each is)...and we peer suspiciously through the keyholes of our eyes, when we have reached the limit of our dwindle--the last dry seed of the self--then we shall see how greatly correct is the work of Samuel Beckett because we shall find there, inside that seed, nothing but his featureless cell, nothing but voice, nothing but darkness and talk (208).

It is my view that the fourth act of Death Kit the "play" offers the reader an alternative to the voyeurism ("keyholes of our eyes"), the spectatorism, the "all ear" type situation of the theater of the text. The fourth act finds its roots in the concepts of Antonin Artaud. We can also find in Artaud, at least in part, the roots of Beckett, for he also stands in opposition to the theater of the text.

I will connect Artaud's concept of the theater of cruelty to my reading of Kit as a four-act play. I begin this connection by linking Diddy to Artaud's concept of cruelty in The Theater and Its Double, Artaud defines cruelty:

From the point of view of the mind, cruelty signifies rigor, implacable intention and decision, irreversible and absolute determinism.... Cruelty is not synonymous with bloodshed, martyred flesh, crucified enemies. This identification of cruelty with tortured victims is a very minor aspect of the question.... Cruelty is above all a kind of rigid control and submission to necessity. There is no cruelty without consciousness and without the application of consciousness. It is consciousness that gives the exercise of every act of life its blood-red color, its cruel nuance, since it is understood that life is always someone's death (101-102).

It is in the fourth act that Diddy attains to the "rigor" and "implacable intention" mentioned above, though if Hester had not consented

to go with him into the tunnel he might well have never made the trip. Diddy is, in the final act, consciously applying his consciousness. The encounter with the second workman does not create Diddy; he, instead, creates the encounter. It is his vision that transforms the second workman into the first.

The state Diddy is in, at the time of his dialogue with Hester at the end of act three, is certainly in line with the following from Artaud:

Effort is a cruelty, existence through effort is a cruelty. Rising from repose and extending himself into being, Brahma suffers, with a suffering that yields joyous harmonics perhaps, but which at the ultimate extremity of the curve can only be expressed by a terrible crushing and grinding (103).

While the capacity for "joyous harmonics" may be present, the "ultimate" power of the "terrible crushing and grinding" cannot be avoided; the "terrible crushing and grinding" must, in fact, occur.

Diddy has, to use Gass' term, shrunk in fear within himself, but he acts rather than remaining a spectator who is created: he creates. His actions, which Tanner calls Sontag's "final burst of imagination" and Nelson sees as the stuff of dreams, find their roots in ritual and spectacle. Diddy wishes to cross the space which separates spectator and spectacle, but his spectator is blind. While Hester has accompanied Diddy into the tunnel, she has not left behind, as he has, the literalness of reality, what the narrator refers to as "the arbitrary technicality of her blindness" (289). It is this "arbitrary technicality" that pins Hester to her individual self, her "human individuality"; Artaud's view of theater wishes to shed this "individuality":

Theater must make itself the equal of life--not an individual life, that individual aspect of life in which CHARACTERS triumph, but the sort of liberated life which sweeps away human individuality and in which man is only a reflection. The true purpose of the theater is to create Myths (116).

It is my view that Diddy's irritation with Hester's refusal to let go of her individuality, her individual being as manifested by her blindness, is born of his desire to triumph. His triumph over the workman is dependent on his triumph over Hester; when she refuses to renounce her blindness, the power of her blindness over her, Hester is, for Diddy, covering up her disbelief in the psychic or theatrical reality he has created by holding tight to the fact that she is blind. Thus, Artaud's goal for an act of drama, of theater, that "the reality of imagination and dreams will appear there on equal footing with life" (123) is not attained. It is my opinion that Diddy's desire to be a "character" who triumphs in a clearly heroic fashion is what causes the fourth act of Kit as a play to fall short of Artaud's liberating potential. The Diddy who triumphantly battles the second workman is still in the grip of "Diddy the Good." Diddy's actions are essential to a certain order, an "Enframing" of the world while Artaud is, as Jerome Rothenberg points out in The Riverside Interviews, "a modern...ritualist of disorder" (77).

It is, I believe, the power of what Artaud refers to as "defunct images of the old myths" that controls Diddy and does not allow him to create what Artaud sees as necessary:

A drama which, without resorting to the defunct images of the Old Myths, shows that it can extract the forces which struggle within them (85).

I see Diddy's turning to Hester after the first encounter with the workman as an unconscious move towards the Oedipal myth. Diddy needs to see Hester as teamed with Incardona; Diddy the narrator describes this need as a knowing: "As he's always known, the two, Hester and Incardona, go together. In him, their destinies are linked" (160). By linking the destinies of these two, Diddy gives his certainly cowardly and perhaps insane attack on the first workman a legitimate interpretation; his act is not the act of a coward or some renegade madman, one whose madness is not "shapely" and "definite," but the act of a legitimately sick person. I believe that Artaud would see Diddy's turning to Oedipus as "resorting to the defunct images of the Old Myths"; Diddy manipulates the Oedipal, at first unconsciously but by act four consciously, in order to convince himself that he is an heroic figure. The power of these "Old Myths" over Diddy prevents him from truly creating or "blowing life" into himself, to use Rothenberg's term; instead he blows life into the myth (55).

For me, reading Death Kit as a play helps to open up the character of Hester. Within the scope of what the narrative in a novel can do, Hester is at best a shallow character; apart from the description of her physical actions and dialogue by or about her, we know nothing about her. The inner Hester is never dealt with; the narrator is not omnipresent for any character but "himself"--Diddy. The narrator does not tell the reader about the motives or inner thoughts of anybody but Diddy; Diddy the narrator is not a traditional third-person narrator: his words are entirely egocentric. But as characters in a play, Hester, Jim, Mrs. Nayburn, Myra, Doris, and Paul are reasonably well-focused. For me,

Hester's strength as a character becomes most apparent in the context of theater.

In The Incarnate Word, Cary Nelson writes:

Diddy discovers that his perceptions can perfectly shape Hester to suit his needs. She is actually a spectrum of dolls he can choose from (20).

The first sentence here tells us that Diddy discovers what any rational adult discovers; the point is, does it do him any good? Can Diddy shape Hester beyond his "perceptions"? Only if he can cause her to do and say as his "needs" demand can we say that Hester is simply a "doll" within a "spectrum of dolls." But this does not occur. For instance, when Hester consents to go into the tunnel with Diddy, he thinks she is joining him in his belief that their actions are not a "game" but "real." He has refused to hear her words: he says it isn't a game, and she replies: "Yes, it is. But let's play...I'll play. I want to play" (278). Heidegger says we must listen, but Diddy does not listen. The force of his need/desire to be a hero rather than a coward, to be in control rather than at drift, will not allow him to listen. The depth to which he is submerged in himself shows itself early in Hester and Diddy's relationship. Diddy is so wrapped up in, submerged in, fear, panic, confusion that he begs blind Hester, a virtual stranger, not to "pity" him. Hester replies: "I'm not sorry for you. I swear it. Tell me what happened" (28). Within the context of Kit as a play, these lines contain a good bit of sarcasm, particularly the "I swear it." Why should Hester pity Diddy? Is he totally self-absorbed, or perhaps he thinks her "legitimate" ailment, blindness, makes his diseased mind pitiable. A short bit later, we get a

line that rings with ridicule in response to Diddy's questions about how much she weeps; Hester says: "'Are you asking me if I've worn out my eyes weeping?' says the girl" (32).

As already mentioned in this paper, Hester does not allow herself to become the burden that Diddy wishes her to be. She takes over the household duties, and he, in response, begins to rapidly crumble. Hester is aware of what's happening and says that she's afraid she is destroying Diddy. He tells her sarcastically not to "flatter" herself; then we get this interchange:

"God, how I'd like to believe I'm not part of it!... But I can't. What I think is that you do want to be destroyed, but aren't strong enough to do it. You do need me to help you. I don't want to--at least I think I don't...."

"Hester--"

"Yes, maybe I do. I'm not a saint. And you're tempting me, Dalton, it's the most depraved kind of seduction. I don't want to destroy you. But deep down I feel that's just what you're begging me to do" (250).

It is my view that Diddy needs Hester in order to destroy himself in an "honorable" (the corrupted use of this concept is certainly fitting in this novel written and set in the mid-1960s) fashion. Her blindness and Diddy's interpretation of that blindness as stubborn disbelief leads, I think, to her death. She is, as I mentioned before, stronger than Diddy in ways that I feel need to be acknowledged. For instance, that she uses him, as he uses her, to help accomplish her own death is not a possibility I can easily reject. Her motives for such actions are certainly more "shapely" and "definite," more legitimate, than Diddy's desire to die: she is hopelessly blind and her own mother is the cause of that blindness.

Hester's strength cannot be overlooked. In Diddy's mind she may be a "doll" within "a spectrum of dolls," but in that space which is not Diddy's mind Hester rebels. They chant "obscenities" and make love like never before, but throughout their lovemaking Hester keeps "her face, guarded by the sunglasses, turned sharply away" (290). She defeats Diddy's quest for heroic redemption, and, in my opinion, that victory leaves her dead.

CONCLUSION

By way of a conclusion to my reading of Death Kit, let me set forth a scenario which allows me to bring the totality of the work into focus; along with this scenario I offer some comments on Sontag's ability as a novelist and Kit's value as a literary text.

After the encounter in the train tunnel with the second workman, Diddy leaves Hester in the tunnel and returns to his apartment. He begins writing Death Kit. He becomes so wrapped up in the writing, and in trying to understand his actions and motives, that the narrator seems at times to be talking to "himself." Diddy the narrator, full of guilt, fear, and dread, yet as exhilarated and at heat in the moment of creation as a Shelley or a Charles Olson; Diddy the narrator surfaces only once in the first-person "I."

Diddy or, more appropriately perhaps, Dalton Harron had not been a writer per se. The oddly constructed sentence fragments, that depend so heavily on what precedes them, are born of this fact, as is the following about the "characters" he has created and the clumsiness of his words:

Exempted from tacking on to those indigestible strips of words being exchanged by the three men seated in a row to his left more strips of words; his words, which are bound to be sticky as taffy or tough like overchewed bubble gum (72).

The conventional view that an independent clause or a sentence must be able to stand alone as a statement is of little, or no, concern to Diddy. You note that I am criticizing Diddy not Sontag. This is not an oversight; this is a reading: I feel that in Death Kit Sontag wrote as Diddy; she played that role: writer-actor self-consciously; Diddy is then

the narrator. I also believe that Artaud as strongly and, I think, more positively than Freud haunts this novel, this "verbal space." However, the madman's triumph over the "shrink" is tainted by the madman's addiction to fairy tale ("Diddy the Good") heroes. Artaud's madness takes a step, I think, past that addiction by shedding what he feels is an enslaving individuality for the freedom of myth and ritual.

The novel's final section in which Diddy surveys the "museum" of the dead is written directly before Diddy's second suicide attempt. By this time Hester's body has been found; a newspaper story refers to her as the victim of rape-murder. Diddy reads the story repeatedly and decides to kill himself; it's the only honorable thing he can do.

The "museum" section of the novel is Diddy's version of a book of the dead, something to take with him on the great voyage, into "the big sleep." Cary Nelson points out that in the concluding section of Kit "events...are finally released from their narrative context" (20). The narrative that precedes the novel's concluding section is, I think, explicitly addressed in Kit's final two sentences:

Diddy has made his final chart; drawn up his last map. Diddy has perceived the inventory of the world (312).

Apart from these lines, I agree with Nelson: events are released from their narrative context. Diddy's book of the dead is concerned only with death. There is no dialogue, and the narrator's awareness of his body becomes finally loving. Diddy wrote this "museum" section after taking the pills, which will kill him, and taking inventory of his own apartment,

by now his world. When putting this to paper, he keeps what is his, his bodily sensations, and let's his fantasies do the rest.

Death Kit is a mystery novel of no small subtlety and wit; it is also something of a suicide note. In relation to this novel as suicide note theme, let us turn again to Cary Nelson; he writes:

The novel is the process by which Diddy accomplishes his own comfortable death. His still body is the accomplished form of the book (20).

Kit is a "still body," just as Diddy by the end of the novel is about to become a still body. If the novel is a suicide note then Diddy has fallen short of Hippolyte's requirement for telling the truth by way of the written word:

If there is any chance of writing something that is true, it will only be because we have banished the thought of another person (13).

Suicide notes are, of course, normally intended for another person. Diddy has, apparently, no more "banished the thought of another person," a reader than Sontag has banished herself as the author of Death Kit. Yet, the degree to which she is able to create a male psyche trapped by civilization (an entrapment similar to Jim's entrapment in Joseph Conrad's Lord Jim) is remarkable. The insights into "manhood" portrayed by that male psyche are, in my opinion, ample proof of her success as a novelist. She takes me to places within the space of being a "man" that I didn't consciously wish to go. Perhaps like Diddy, my subconscious became conscious during the course of Death Kit. I know that when Diddy is said to desire a complicity of touch and mouth; then Hester, by the act of fellatio, pulls him away "from thinking, from memory, from words, from

Paul," my mind flashes to a bartender-poet-author of a thesis on Joyce, a friend of mine in the early 1970s, who often spoke, especially when drunk, of every man's secret idea of paradise being "to go catapulting through eternity" with his sexual organ in his mouth; then he'd laugh and say: "There'd be nobody to talk to anyway." I add to this: such a posture is, of course, a perfect sphere; it also fulfills Diddy's desire for complicity. The novel summoned this distant voice and its accompanying images, and, in so doing, it caused or helped me to come in contact with my own experience in new ways. While such an accomplishment is highly personal, it does, for me as a human and a reader, speak positively of Death Kit's value.

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