I, etcetera
by Susan Sontag
(Farrar, Straus & Giroux; 246 pp.; $8.95)

Martin Green

The photograph of the author on the dust jacket shows her booted and jeaned, gloriously greying, and lounging on a windowseat, with a skyscraper skyline behind. She looks beautiful, and therefore challenging; what do we mousy readers have to offer, what stake can we put down, in the encounter to come? The stories themselves, however, are not challenging but reassuring. Susan Sontag is alive and well and living on Riverside Drive. She may have a “Project for a Trip to China” (the title of the first piece in the collection), but she won’t go—or if she goes, she won’t stay. It’s a comfortable message, comforting, deoxygenating.

In earlier volumes of hers one felt the presence of extremists, strange people who had gone beyond the limits of intelligence and civility: Simone Weil, Artaud, de Sade, Genêt. In this volume one stays in the presence of the central consciousness, which encounters such possibilities as essentially alien. In “Dr. Jekyll” the hero is preoccupied with two other men who live more dangerously than he—Hyde, the city rat, and Utterson, the psychopomp—but he is himself a handsome, healthy, and devoted doctor. They exert authority over his imagination, as Kurtz does over Marlowe’s in Heart of Darkness, to use Trilling’s example of this modern phenomenon. But for Sontag, Jekyll himself is the central enigma, who commands her and our imagination.

Perhaps the most successful of these eight pieces is “Debriefing,” in which the central character broods over an old friend, Julia, for whom he feels responsible and who finally commits suicide. The story is interesting and moving because of the meditative rhetoric Sontag devises, which convincingly suggests the kind of concern a woman of great gifts and resources might feel for another woman, basically silly, wasteful, self-destructive—a creature of mere charm. The note of that rhetoric is inevitably amused and condescending—though also affectionate and concerned, quite apart from the writer’s feeling her own plight to be essentially the same. And the amusement and condescension are clear enough for the death to come as a shock and a reproach.

The speaker of that story always expresses to Julia “pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will,” she tells us, and other representatives of the author speak for “secular rationalism.” The alternatives (in this story a black voodoo priestess, in “Dr. Jekyll” the Gurdjieff-type guru) seem sordid and sinister—beyond the story’s pale. Only in “Project for a Trip to China” does the speaker try to get beyond secular rational or humanist limits, in the direction of “goodness” and “wisdom.” And this piece is more an essay than a story. Sontag’s essays have always been more adventurous than her fiction; they invited in wild men from beyond culture, and the author herself worked mostly to silence our protests and force us to listen. (But even in the case of Artaud, whom she served this way as much as anyone, her introduction to a selection of his works concluded that one can’t read too much of him at once—an oddly philistine resolution of the tension.)

That first piece is very interesting, and “Debriefing” is moving, but I would not say that this volume on the whole offers an intense artistic experience. There are two satires, “Baby” and “Dummy”; the first is unsuccessful (a clumsy fantasy on the situation of parents going to a psychiatrist to complain of their child); the second is successful but within narrow limits of predictability (a man constructs a model to replace him in his boring functions at work and in the family, and then the dummy goes wild and he has to build himself another such—has to split himself yet again). The other pieces hardly seem worth describing, though there are of course satisfying touches, handsome sentences along the way. Indeed, the author’s personality is attractive and her intelligence impressive. Sontag is developing into a “wise woman.”

It’s too bad that that role should be so heavily indented by her sense of the limits of all wisdom, but she does still struggle against her fate. She seeks ways to transcend it. In “Old Complaints Revisited” she presents herself as a translator, one of the major images of the modern intellectual, but one still trying to change her life. And in “Project” she regrets her commitment to “literature”—that is, to the stasis represented by turning everything into writing. At the end she notes: “The only solution: both to know and not to know. Literature and not literature, using the same verbal gestures.”

In the last story, “Unguided Tour,” she sounds very like The Waste Land. “The sun having mounted and the heat elsewhere too extreme for us, we have retired to the tree-shaded courtyard. It’s not that I loved him. But in a certain hour of physical fatigue...” And that motif is repeated. Indeed, the whole story, being about high-culture tourism, reminds us of Eliot’s poem. And isn’t “Debriefing,” with its “What if she should die some afternoon?” very like Portrait of a Lady?

This should perhaps not surprise us; there have always been resemblances between Sontag and Eliot’s aphoristic essays, with their haughty directives to us to get with it, to turn from our slack-muscled English-language old favorites to France, where real intellectual rigor abounds, And then both writers’ revelations of the aching and quite spiritual anxiety behind the dandyism. So that now this humorous declaration of limits...
reached and recurrence foreseen, these hints of immense discretion and weary wisdom, should fit into the pattern. And why shouldn’t she follow his line of development? Why should this aged eagle stretch its wings any more than that one? Eliot was after all only forty-five when he wrote that line. But it’s pretty funny, too, to see his Anglican aquilinity glittering out of her face, above that pantherine body on the windowseat.

Woman’s Proper Place: A History of Changing Ideals and Practices, 1870 to the Present
by Sheila M. Rothman
(Basic Books; xiv + 322 pp.; $12.50)

Martha Bayles

Sheila Rothman’s thesis is that in the last hundred years middle-class American women, animated by a series of idealized definitions of womanhood, have initiated and carried forth various movements for social reform—only to founder, as they neared success, upon either of two obstacles. The first obstacle is the self-interest of the organized professions—particularly the medical profession, which has appropriated ideas and programs originally put forth by women reformers as new (and profitable) extensions of its own domain. The second obstacle, stressed heavily by Rothman in her introduction and general remarks elsewhere, is the failure of each successive ideal of womanhood to bridge the gap between social classes, and speak to the values and needs of lower-class women.

Of the first obstacle we are given many examples, foremost among them the fate of the Sheppard-Towner Act, passed in 1921 and intended to reduce infant and maternal mortality through the establishment of free public clinics. Glowing, yet more in terms of intention than results, Rothman describes the clinics (staffed mostly by female public health nurses) as an effort to provide services physicians did not, and to provide them to the poor. She relates how the medical profession discredited the women involved, red-baited them, and finally incorporated their system of prenatal and well-baby care into standard private practice. By 1930 the act was repealed, and presumably the poor lost out. Clearly, we are to place the blame on the growing power and self-interest of the medical profession rather than on any superior expertise it might have possessed, or any shortcomings in the Sheppard-Towner program.

Of the second obstacle we are given a great deal of lip service, but really only one example: Temperance. Temperance (and the other ministrations of what Rothman calls “Virtuous Womanhood” in the post Civil War decades, such as working girls’ clubs and the Florence Crittention Missions for “fallen women”) is unequivocally presented as an imposition of middle-class values upon lower-class people. Obviously the masses of immigrant poor in those years did not need instruction in virtuous living as much as they needed a living wage.

If Rothman actually believes that Temperance is the only example in American history of the imposition of middle-class ideals of womanhood upon the poor, then we should not complain that we are given no others. But she holds no such belief. On the contrary, she repeatedly states that she considers “class-boundedness” a perennial problem in organized American women’s movements. And just as repeatedly, she states her intention to scrutinize the contemporary scene in precisely such a light. Yet, beginning with her account of the birth-control campaign of the 1920’s and continuing through to such present-day issues as the ERA, abortion, and day care, she does no such thing.

What she does do, consistently and with varying degrees of convinciness, is repeat in each instance one or another version of her Sheppard-Towner argument—namely, that professionals tend to take over meaningful reforms initiated by women, throw the women out, and then deliver the benefits of the reform to the paying customer—the middle class. It is important to observe here that the benefit of Sheppard-Towner—the health of mothers and babies—was probably perceived as such by those for whom the program was designed, as well as by those who designed it. It was not the imposition of alien values Temperance was, and therefore Rothman’s antiprofessional argument is fairly convincing. But, starting with her discussion of birth control, she overlooks implications in her own evidence that at least some of the opposition to certain other reforms may have come, not from encroaching professionals, but from lower-class people unwilling or unable to perceive the reforms as benefits. She passes lightly over the fact that the early birth-control clinics were forced to close by Catholic and other community groups, as well as evidence that the lower classes rejected contraception (and the “liberating” notions of sex linked with it) as strongly as the middle classes accepted it. Rothman presents this material with no explanation other than her old standby: that birth control and the sex counseling it entailed were swallowed up by the growing octopus of medicine. She does not confront the possibility that the movement developed as it did at least in part because the lower classes—the immigrants, the Catholics, the extended families—simply disapproved of it.

She displays a like reluctance in her final chapter to confront similar possibilities today, despite her oft-repeated intention to do so. The reason is plain enough: Unlike Temperance and nineteenth-century notions of virtue, birth control and today’s feminist reforms are perceived as indisputable benefits, not only by their proponents, but by Sheila Rothman herself. In fact, her approval of these things is a good deal stronger than her ability to imagine anyone else’s disapproval. Yet, at the same time, she rather coolheadedly sizes up today’s women’s movement as having become another middle-class “vested interest group.” As a result, her discussion of such burning issues as the ERA, day care, and abortion is stunningly equivocal.