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THE AFTERLIVES OF SUSAN TAUBES

Her suicide, on the publication of her first novel, made her an icon of doomed femininity, but rediscovered works are revealing a more complex writer.

By Merve Emre

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Previously unpublished work casts new light on Taubes, who killed herself in 1969. Photograph courtesy Ethan and Tania Taubes



Save this story

In Sigmund Freud's "Rat Man," a case history of a neurotic young man, there is a curious footnote about the natural uncertainty of paternity. For a man to believe that his father truly was his father, he had to accept what no evidence could corroborate. Paternity was not a physical relation, Freud explained. It was an idea that sprang, as if already fully formed, from one's mind. "The prehistoric figures which show a smaller person sitting upon the head of a larger one are representations of patrilineal descent," he wrote. "Athena had no mother, but sprang from the head of Zeus."

But Freud was wrong. Athena *did* have a mother: Metis, whom Zeus swallowed, fearing that the children she bore would be too mighty for him to govern. In some versions of the myth, Metis, while pregnant inside Zeus, made her daughter a breastplate, which Athena eventually adorned with the decapitated head of the gorgon Medusa, whose eyes held the power to turn anyone who looked upon her into stone. "To decapitate = to castrate," Freud wrote elsewhere. Had he put the two heads together, he might have wondered at the paradox they presented: that the fierce and divine female child could symbolize both the extension of the patriarch's authority and its undoing.

Susan Taubes's novel "Divorcing" (1969) begins with a report in *France-Soir* of a *femme décapitée*, a woman whose head was cut clean off when she was hit by a car in the Eighteenth Arrondissement of Paris. The woman, Sophie Blind, is, like Taubes, the daughter of a psychoanalyst, the granddaughter of a rabbi, and the estranged wife of a scholar and a rabbi. She is also the mother of mostly male children, and the lover of Gaston, Roland, Alain, Nicholas, and Ivan. In flight from her married life in New York, she has just moved to Paris with her children. She is killed before she has a chance to finish arranging the furniture in her new apartment.

In life, Sophie's mind and her body were beholden to men. In death, her severed head is free to wander backward through her life in a series of surreal images. Her head can detach from the first-person point of view and float into omniscience. It can leap across time and space: to her marriage in New York, to her melancholy childhood in Budapest. It can fantasize about her funerals—there are at least two—or imagine her dead body on a dissection table, "the four limbs together, the skin carefully folded, the glands in a separate bowl." It can filch a phrase here, an entire form there: a joke from Freud, an essay on "losing and being lost" by his daughter Anna, a dreamlike play-within-a-novel from "Ulysses." When it cannot make sense of Sophie's life, it can summon gods and men to its aid. "Gorgons, my sisters. Poseidon, where are you? Homer, Heraclitus, Nietzsche, Joyce, comfort me!" Sophie pleads.

The head is the ideal guide to a novel whose subject is severance in its many agonizing forms: familial, national, religious, and, above all, subjective. “Divorcing” is the story of a woman estranged from a sense of self that she never assented to, a self she seems to have accumulated passively. Leaving her marriage is one way of casting off this self and “coming into consciousness, a lifelong struggle,” Sophie thinks. She recalls her hostile and baffling encounters with her parents, her love affairs, her degrading fights with her husband, and her anxious fussing over her children. All this seems to have led her to a turning point, a moment of self-definition. But how should a woman be after she has been severed from the social order? Cut off from the men who gave her a sense, however oppressive, of her place in the world?

At one of the funerals, the head rises to deliver a kind of answer to these questions: “Woman is part less than human, part more than human and part human.” A woman must be an entity that is unformed and unfixed. She must unburden herself from the expectation that she will be consistent and knowable, like a character in a nineteenth-century realist novel. “I’m not hanging on to the old psychology, ego hang-up, continuity bit, the whole business of being a person, it’s absurd,” Sophie declares. Most of us simply accept the whole business of being a person and go about our lives. But that, Taubes suggests, is not living at all.

The Best Books We Read This Week

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Days after the novel was published, Taubes walked into the sea at East Hampton and drowned herself. Inevitably, for readers, the novel’s dead narrator and its dead author merged into an emblem of glamorous, doomed femininity. Recently, however, there has been a reappraisal of Taubes’s work. In 2003, the Leibniz Center for Literary and Cultural Research, in Berlin, established a Taubes archive, describing her life as a “story in which Jewish exile meets female intellectualism.” From her papers, there emerged surprising discoveries: unpublished fiction; two volumes’ worth of letters between her and her husband, Jacob Taubes, a scholar of religion; and enough notes and manuscripts to inspire two books, an intellectual biography by Christina Pareigis, and Elliot R. Wolfson’s “[The Philosophical Pathos of Susan Taubes](#)” (Stanford), a study of the philosophical work that she produced alongside her fiction. In 2020, New York Review Books reissued “Divorcing” to appreciative reviews. Now they have released her far superior unpublished novella “[Lament for Julia](#),” along with nine short stories.

This flurry of activity seems to demand a reckoning on Taubes’s behalf, and recent critics have declared her fiction a feminist triumph over the patrilineal line—over her father and her husband; over Freud and Heidegger; over the critic Hugh Kenner, who, hearing the echoes of James Joyce and Harold Robbins in “Divorcing,” dismissed her in the *Times* as “a quick-change artist with the

clothes of other writers.” Here, one wants to insist, was a woman whose thoughts sprang from no one’s head but her own. Here was a woman who, when faced with the scorn and the judgment of the patriarchs, laughed the laugh of the Medusa, and turned these stony-faced men into even stonier stones.

But this is too simple a revision. For Taubes, no woman could ever truly free herself from existing in some relation to men—of being, and of having been, begotten by them, flesh of their flesh, blood of their blood, their ideas and their history the starting point of her struggle. “I can’t make a revolution,” she wrote. “But we must at least plant the seeds.”

Her name was not Susan Taubes, not at first. In 1928, she was born Judit Zsuzánná Feldmann, the daughter of Sándor Feldmann, a respected Freudian psychoanalyst, and the granddaughter of Mózes Feldmann, who had been the Grand Rabbi of Budapest. Biographers stress Taubes’s sense of grievance toward her mother, the “pitiful and neurotic dragon” who had brought her into being only to abandon her for a new life with a new husband. “One could not become a ‘hero’ slaying her,” Taubes commented. In 1939, the year the Hungarian government began to conscript Jewish men into its forced-labor service, Sándor Feldmann and his daughter immigrated to the United States.

In America, Judit Zsuzánná became Susan. She was a serious and brilliant student, first at Bryn Mawr, then at Harvard, where she received a doctorate in the history and philosophy of religion for her work on Simone Weil’s quest for an absent God. When she was still an undergraduate, she met and married Jacob Taubes, who had been born to a Jewish family in Vienna. Their published correspondence—rapturous letters on art, exile, Judaism, and Heidegger which they exchanged from 1950 to 1952—reveals a shared desire to find a way to be at home in the world. “Heidegger says one very true and wise thing, that to attain authenticity of Being is not a matter of driving toward a certain goal,” Susan wrote. It was a matter of staying in the same place, which was, for her, “literally the *home* the dimension where man and woman, Father, Mother, child, friend and friend, priest and participant, come home.” In New York, where the couple settled, Susan Taubes joined an experimental-theatre troupe and edited volumes of Native American and African folktales. She had two children and taught religion at Columbia. She became a close friend of Susan Sontag, who, with her characteristic mixture of attraction and suspicion, referred to Taubes as her “double.”

To an observer, Taubes would seem to have found her place. But her academic success, her marriage, her children—none of it reconciled her to the world. America remained a foreign country to her. Now Hungary was one, too. The bond of marriage, which Taubes described in “Divorcing” as a state of “sheer twoness that endured independent of moods, likes and dislikes,” did not endure; she and Jacob separated in 1961, after many infidelities and cruelties. She drifted away from academia, but neither her criticism nor her fiction found an enthusiastic audience. “The homeland she could discover was in exile,” Wolfson observes. “But in such a homeland, one

finds one's place only by being displaced."

Her fictions are unhomely works, tales of bewildered, wild, and estranged women, who dwell, as Taubes imagined it, in "neither pure light nor pure darkness." Their ghostly voices flit between the material and spiritual realms. Years after Taubes's suicide, Sontag evoked her intellectual project in a short story, "Debriefing." The narrator's friend Julia spends her days cultivating love affairs and wondering. "Wondering?" the narrator asks, to which Julia replies:

"Oh, I might start wondering about the relation of that leaf"—pointing to one—"to that one"—pointing to a neighbor leaf, also yellowing, its frayed tip almost perpendicular to the first one's spine. "Why are they lying there just like that? Why not some other way?"

"Crazy," the narrator thinks dismissively. For Sontag, Taubes functioned in part as a kind of cautionary tale, a parable of squandered brilliance. The tableau she creates of Julia is beautiful—the delicacy of the personified leaves, the contingency of their arrangement, the earnestness of Julia's wondering—yet ultimately parodic. The search for truth is always in danger of toppling into either pretension or madness.

But Sontag undersells the sophistication of Taubes's philosophy. The fiction courted neither insanity nor despair. Rather, it created a strain of dark antihumanist comedy that drew its humor from its insistence that reason and agency were illusions, and that "homelessness, insecurity and fear" were the grounds of authentic being. "Wonder myself why the comedy," Sophie's head remarks. It yearns for a world in which a person could cease to exist without leaving any trace of her existence: "Whisk one's self out of the world whole—dress, shoes, gloves, pure and all."

Lament for Julia" was originally called "Confession of a Ghost," which Taubes proclaimed a less dignified, if funnier, title for a comic novel. Yet the difference between a confession and a lament is one not just of tone but of purpose. We confess in the hope of redemption; we lament knowing that redemption is impossible. All one can do is howl in sorrow and, when sorrow has been exhausted, laugh.



“Just tell me if the movie was supposed to make sense or not supposed to make sense.”

Cartoon by Bruce Eric Kaplan

What has been lost in the novella is a wife and mother named Julia Klopps, the descendant of an haute-bourgeois family that has fallen into grotesque disrepair in what Taubes called “undefined, implied central European settings.” Julia is the child of Father and Mother Klopps, cold and vaguely incestuous creatures who sit in a vast, moldering house while butlers, nurses, and maids scurry about. As a child, Julia is a daydreamer, absconding to the attic to fantasize about being kidnapped by gypsies and rescued by her dark prince, her true love. At fifteen, she is violently deflowered by Bruno, a soldier wider than he is high and baldish. At eighteen, she marries Peter Brody, a naval engineer with a small, graying head, a timid man raised by his spinster aunts. Between eighteen and twenty-nine, she has three children. At twenty-nine, she has an affair with a young architect named Paul Holle, her “one great passion.” After they separate, she has her final child, whose paternity is uncertain. After turning thirty, she disappears.

She is made to reappear by an unnamed voice that, mourning her disappearance, narrates glimpses of her life:

She is gone. Julia has left me. For good now, I think. She went silently under the cover of night. It was the only way she could leave without being followed. I think of her going out into the night, going out like a candle, going down perhaps. I will never know where. I will never know how long ago. This used to be Julia’s room. She left skirts hanging in the closet, the many skirts I bought her, flared, pleated and scalloped. I try them on one after another. . . . Her skirts subdue and appease me.

Who, or what, is the voice that speaks from under Julia's gorgeous skirts? It fancies itself an "actor," an "artist," a poor puppeteer. It is a "celestial spark," a "fallen angel," an "exalted consciousness," a brooding ghost. It is a whisper in the ear, warning Julia not to sin: "God is looking at you now, Julia." It is a parasite, "mysteriously grafted on Julia." It is convinced that it is real and that Julia, the fleshly creature, is a mere semblance, a series of costumes and masks—"a demure Julia, a seductive Julia, a maternal Julia"—that may be worn and discarded. The drama of the lament is as much about the uncertainty of the voice's identity and origins as it is about Julia's fate and folly.

What does the voice want? Above all, it desires order and propriety. It longs to transform its charge from the moody, chubby "Klopps girl" in a puffed-sleeve dress into "a lady, a dream, an apparition!" Sometimes it seems able to intervene in her life, or, at least, to convince itself that it has agency with regard to her actions: "My next ten years with Julia were spent mostly watching over her manners: keeping her from sticking out her belly, holding her head to one side, chewing her nails, sitting with her legs apart, laughing at the wrong time." In Julia's adolescence, the voice is mortified by her bloating flesh, by her monthly cycles and the leaking hole between her legs, where it would prefer to find a stiffening member. She cannot "even cast her own water from herself without wetting her bush," it complains. "But enough of the melancholy topic of the cunt. The missing member was enough to disconsole me, even apart from the nightmares I projected into Julia's concavity."

Classic penis envy, the voice admits, sneering at the psychology volumes that line the family's bookshelf. Its fixation on the phallus is a symptom of its own anxiety about its inability to live outside Julia's body. "Did I exist? Was I a thinking substance?," it wonders, not convinced, as Descartes was, that its ability to ask the question answers it. It is enlightened enough to know that no higher power has authorized its existence: "If it had only pleased God to seal my appointment, everything would have turned out differently." It has read widely in philosophy and the history of religion but still cannot find a reason for its being. Its learned voice slips from solipsism to contempt, prurience to prudery; from inside Julia's limbs to outside her body, as she indulges her "stupid, harmless vices, window shopping, bubble baths, waiting for her true love to appear, paging through endless stacks of fashion magazines."

"Lament for Julia" devises a feminist metaphysics, or, as the voice puts it with comic incredulity, a portrait of "the elements of being in a skirt!" The voice is the spirit of old European civilization—from Augustine to Freud—battling the flesh of a young woman. It is what Taubes, in her correspondence, called the "not-I," as distinct from the "I" that one uses to fix one's identity in speech and in writing. It is the superego personified, made monstrous, obscene, sadistic, and abject. It is the voice of the cunt—described by Taubes elsewhere as "a nothing, a *negativum*"—at the center of existence.

The voice can be silenced only by Julia's surrender to conformity, the straitjacketing of her desire by a Christian sense of shame and law-giving. "The holy family!," it proclaims after Julia marries

Peter, apparently sealing her bourgeois fate. Together, Julia and the voice “become transfigured,” it says. “Pure, remote, angelic, I basked in the morning sunlight that fell upon Julia’s hand serving coffee, or brushing her daughter’s hair.” The lament testifies to everything that women repress—desire, disappointment, rage—in order to be consecrated as women before the presence of God the Father and Peter, the Biblical patriarch, the rock on which the Church and its orthodoxies were built. “I codified the past, set down the canon for good, a final version,” the voice announces.

The voice inhabits many roles, but, in the end, it is Julia herself, a paradoxically singular and divided creature. As such, the voice cannot abide by its own doctrines; Julia’s body will betray it and her husband both. Her affair with Paul Holle begins after he sees her on a park bench. They meet in shops and in gardens, at the hairdresser and in the bookstore. They drive in the country and have sex in his shabby room while the spinster aunts mind the lonely, perplexed children. The great accomplishment of “Lament for Julia” is how imperceptibly it draws the fine filaments of sympathy between the voice and Julia—the anguished control with which consciousness is harnessed to flesh. Soon, the voice cannot tell what influence it has, or could ever have again, over Julia’s will:

Was there a decision to be made, when she lay naked between another man’s sheets? . . . Had Julia made her decision? She sat by the window with opiate eyes. Like some sea plant incapable of volition, yet responsive to every ripple; a fish brushing against its fine hairs would cause its cup to dilate and shut. He came up behind her and laid his hand on her throat. Her mouth went after it, lay open on his hand. Was that a decision?

Under the reign of Eros, spirit and flesh come to coexist in an involuntary state of being, “incapable of volition, yet responsive to every ripple.” Julia’s transgressions bring the voice to consciousness, to life; in turn, the voice gives Julia’s life a sense of purpose. It has a reason to speak, to exist: she has a story to tell, even if it is an “old melodrama,” headlined by “a woman past thirty waiting to be saved, ready at the glimmer of a hope to fall from the dignity of marriage and motherhood.” Yet the growing intimacy of Julia and the voice comes at a terrible price: the crackup of the Julia of the holy family into many Julias who cannot be reconciled. There is the Julia who feels safe with Peter, and the Julia who feels alive with Paul. There is the Julia who resigns herself to the life she has made, and the Julia who hopes to disappear from it. (Paul, knowing that Julia is incapable of making a decision, realizes that he must be the one to leave.)

At the end of the affair, where has Julia gone? Physically, she is still present, dressing the children, or bringing in the milk, or sitting in the shed at night alone, drinking gin and playing solitaire. But, as the novella draws to a close, it is clear that she and the voice are undergoing a mutually assured destruction. The voice’s rebukes are murdering her desire, and the murder of her desire is silencing the voice. Confronted with the docile Julia, the uncomplaining Julia, the gin-numbed Julia, the voice will find that it has no reason left to speak.

In the archives of the Radcliffe Institute, at Harvard, there is a recording, from 1966, of Taubes reading from “Lament for Julia.” The voices of the dead are often seductive, but hers is

especially mesmerizing. When she begins to read, it is in a fragile murmur that is precise, calm, and almost clinically detached. When she breaks off and leaps ahead to a later passage—to the “many Julias, one to be a whore, one to marry in white, another, no, at least a dozen little Julias to be raped in turn”—the murmur turns insistent and agitated, stumbling on its own words. When she stops reading and explains the novel in asides to the audience, it is with small sighs of apology, hesitation, and embarrassment. “I wrote it while I was teaching comparative mythology and history of religion, which I fear shows,” she says. “I realized perhaps too late in the book that it’s really a comic novel, and, had I known that earlier, probably I would have written a less mournful work.”

Listening to the strange rhythms of Taubes’s delivery, one realizes how much is lost when the abstracted voice of the lament becomes a real voice emanating from an actual human body. The novella’s success hangs on the voice remaining dislocated: “In the dark I try to remember Julia.” It must be capable of existing everywhere and nowhere, of moving into and out of Julia’s body without her consent or even her knowledge. Julia’s “sole right to exist was through my strict, fastidious, incarnal presence,” the voice insists. Conversely, its existence is premised on Julia’s unreality—the absence of her words, the immateriality of her body.

By the time of the reading, Taubes had approached several publishers about “Lament for Julia,” including Jérôme Lindon, at Les Éditions des Minuit, in Paris. One of Lindon’s authors, Samuel Beckett, wrote in support, pronouncing Taubes “an authentic talent.” He described “Lament for Julia” as the “study of a ‘pendue,’ tension between ‘I’ and ‘she,’ search of identity. . . . Pronounced erotic touches, very effective rawness of language.” The “pendue” likely refers to the hanged man of the tarot deck, suspended upside down on a tree whose branches reach up to heaven and whose roots grow down to hell. What appealed to Taubes and Beckett about the pendue was the involuntary nature of her body’s reactions—what Beckett called “the integrity of the eyelids coming down before the brain knows of the grit in the wind.” As a genre, the lament is, after all, adjacent to the spontaneous sighs and shapeless screams of mourners. It carries the purity of their suffering.

Taubes, near the end of her reading at the Radcliffe Institute, acknowledged Beckett’s influence. “I was sort of thinking, Well, if you do have problems like Samuel Beckett, and, at the same time, you’re a woman, how can you write *Madame Unnamable*?” she told her audience. This may have been what she set out to do in “Lament for Julia,” but she ended up doing one better, creating a female precursor of the male voice in “Company,” a novella that Beckett composed nearly a decade after Taubes’s death. In it, a voice addresses a man in the dark, speaking about a mother, a father, and a lover—glimpses of a past life that are attached ever so tenuously to the prostrate body of the present. The voice Beckett devised is a sparser, gentler, and more constant presence than Taubes’s raging and changeable spirit. But it brokers the same relationship, between the comedy of the unprotected, reactive body and the pathos of the self-conscious voice. “I. We. She. No, I give up,” Taubes ends her lament. Beckett begins his, “Use of the second person marks the

voice. That of the third the cankerous other. Could he speak to and of whom the voice speaks there would be a first. But he cannot. He shall not. You cannot. You shall not.”

Between Beckett and Taubes range all the voices in which literature can speak: first, second, and third person, singular and plural, each estranged from the world but still in touch with its elemental matter. In their dark, there is no man who boasts of his creation. No woman raises a head in triumph. But, if we pay attention, we hear something else, part more human, part less—a faint sob of laughter. Listen. It keeps itself company. ♦

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