Hi, seminar participants and other AJS conference attendees! This is a strange piece; it was something I began to write as part of my forthcoming book, The Literary Mafia, but eventually decided to cut because it wasn’t relevant enough to my arguments there. I’ll be publishing a very short version of it (just over 1000 words) in AJS Perspectives, and the longer version of it you have here (about 3000 words) is my attempt to explore whether there’s something more to do with it—maybe expand it a little further and publish it in a journal, in part to include the citations to the reception history, and to integrate new material from the NYRB reprint and its introduction? It’s speculative in approach and I hope at least a little provocative, and I’ll be interested to hear what responses you have both to the claims I make here, and your suggestions for what (if anything) I should do with this.

It does not seem unreasonable to describe Susan Taubes’ novel Divorcing, first published by Random House in 1969 (and reissued in October 2020 by New York Review), as an autobiographical novel. Reviewers did so, explicitly, in 1969, and again, with more literary-
critical sophistication, this fall. What’s less obvious is what we, as readers and critics, should do, once we accept that the novel conveys truths about real-world figures.

The novel tells the story of a fictional character, Sophie Blind, whose experiences obviously and straightforwardly line up, in many ways, with those of the novelist, Susan Taubes. Both were born in Hungary; both moved to the U.S.; both married a charismatic rabbi and Jewish Studies scholar (Sophie marries Ezra Blind; Susan married Jacob Taubes) and had several children with him, while moving back and forth from Paris, New York, and other cities, as they followed short-term academic jobs and fellowships.

Among its other strengths, the novel offers a powerful sense of what marriage to an intellectual man could offer to an intellectual woman in the midcentury U.S., under the conditions of patriarchy that continued to limit women’s opportunities. Sophie understands that her marriage defines her and sets the conditions of possibility for her social experience:

She did not forget … that she was Ezra’s wife sitting in company; that it was under this cover that she could be anywhere or nowhere, anyone or no one. … Even when Sophie couldn’t bear Ezra, she loved the marriage. It was a many-layered shroud whose weight she relished. To carry it eased, simplified entering a room full of people, it justified her presence in the room. There it was, a costume ready-made for public occasions. Ezra’s wife; this was the answer to anyone who wanted to know her. She was the woman Ezra Blind had married. It had weight and power: like an impermeable cloak it warded off the inevitable swarm of prying, talky, argumentative, interrogating people. The shroud served to receive the obligatory marks and tags, it absorbed unavoidable stains, its fabric
wrinkled and stretched obligingly. It saved her skin. How not cherish a garment so serviceable?²

Sophie perceives the many benefits to her reputation of having married a well-known intellectual: “absorb[ing] unavoidable stains,” “stretch[ing] obligingly.” In other words, the fact of her marriage gives her latitude to act as she chooses and freedom from the judgment of strangers, that “inevitable swarm of prying, talky, argumentative, interrogating people.” This was a major part of the appeal of marriage to female intellectuals (and women in general) in the U.S. in the middle of the 20th century: in a system that tightly constrained women’s opportunities, having a male partner often opened opportunities both directly and indirectly.

At the same time, the passage above indicates that the social benefits of marriage exist irrespective of the actual experience of spending time with a particular husband, noting that there are times “when Sophie couldn’t bear Ezra.” And in fact, Ezra is hardly what might be considered an ideal husband to Sophie. He cheats on her regularly and openly, manipulates and exploits her, and—most damagingly—refuses to divorce her when she requests it.

Complaining that a divorce would be “economically unfeasible” (39), refusing to grant the divorce “unless you have someone else to marry you” (34), and at one point, in one of the novel’s phantasmagoric passages, proclaiming that “Sophie Blind remains my wife till the Messiah comes” (129), Ezra denies Sophie freedom that she explicitly and repeatedly demands. While Sophie simply and straightforwardly tells him, “I don’t want to be married to you,” he seems incapable of treating this as a straightforward request made by a rational person:
As for breaking the marriage, he did not take that seriously, of course, he never took that seriously, he says sternly, and with bitterness and superiority now; takes off his coat, his galoshes, and continues. A responsible man, under great strain, a reasonable man, a patient man, speaking to a woman undeserving of his patience, an irresponsible, childish woman, seething with spite and vindictiveness, driven by impossible dreams, lacking all sense of reality; a woman he once loved, against whose folly he must now protect the home, the family. A man cursed to perform this grim duty. (32)

A few pages later, Ezra addresses Sophie directly: “You have no reason to want a divorce. You just want to break the marriage. Why? Are you evil? Are you bent on destruction?” (34). “So that’s what you are. A bitch,” Ezra says, thinking, “It’s a psychiatrist she needs. Or a lover, or a beating. Beat her blue” (39). When Sophie says, “The thought of being married to you drives me insane,” Ezra replies: “Then see an analyst. I have no more time to waste on these discussions. We have more important things to talk about” (34).

Gaslighting Sophie unceasingly, Ezra projects a sense of himself as “responsible” and “reasonable” and his wife as “lacking all sense of reality,” an “evil” “bitch” “bent on destruction” who deserves therapy or a “beating,” and whose sexuality he expects to serve his desires and fantasies. Notwithstanding his pose as “patient” and “reasonable,” Ezra admits, without apology, that he “fool[s] around with other women” (41), among whom is a seventeen-year-old girl who was babysitting his children, and whom he “deflower[s]” (129), though he meanwhile insists that Sophie remains “the only woman [he] ever loved” (41).

Eventually, in a phantasmagoric trial sequence, Sophie, already dead, demands her divorce from a rabbinical court, and, after a series of testimonies (by Sophie’s father, women
with whom Ezra has had affairs, and others) the rabbis declare that “Her divorce is granted, whether she is alive or dead,” and, lying in her coffin, “she is presented with a Bill of Divorce” (135).

The tragic and gruesome literary historical context for reading the novel is that a week after the novel was published and reviewed, Susan Taubes committed suicide. While such a series of events might be expected to have created a success de scandale and elevated the profile of the book, the opposite seems to have happened: the novel received little press, quickly went out of print, and until the new reprint, was difficult to find.

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What relationship between art and life should inform the way we think about this novel? One possible answer—a bad one—is available in its reception. Reporting on Taubes’ death in 1969, a few newspaper articles implied a causal connection between the novel’s reception and the end of Taubes’ life. The most succinct and blunt of these was an article in a New Jersey newspaper headlined, “Novel Panned, Author Suicide.” In introducing the new edition of the novel, David Rieff remarks that his mother, Susan Sontag, propagated such a reading during her lifetime: “My mother … always thought that the proximate cause of Taubes’s suicide was the bad reviews the novel received.” Rieff acknowledges, understandably without criticizing his mother too harshly, that this probably wasn’t fair (he notes he is “channeling” his mother, and suggests it’s unclear “whether [her belief] was true or not in the most immediate sense”).

That reading—“Novel Panned, Author Suicide”—is a bad one not only because it propagates a tempting but false narrative about artistic failure that ignores the realities of
depression, mental illness, and suicide (although that is one major problem with it). Another reason not to accept this reading is that it isn’t historically true, in the case of *Divorcing*: the novel was not panned, but reviewed respectfully. Taubes was complimented for “writ[ing] beautifully” and for her “obvious seriousness and intelligence” and “exceptional literary talent,” and sections of the novel were called “tremendously skillful and moving,” with one review headlined, “An Arresting Novel of Inner Feeling.” Other early reviewers compared Taubes’ work, affirmatively, to that of James Joyce and Doris Lessing. Reviewers did express disappointment with various aspects of the book, in the very conventional way that book reviews almost always do, and Hugh Kenner’s semi-infamous review in the *New York Times Book Review* was absurd, trotting out misogynistic clichés in its remark that the book, like the fiction of Taubes’ friend Sontag, “did not [transcend] the with-it cat’s cradling of lady novelists.” (One wonders how Kenner’s dig at Sontag influenced Sontag’s view, per Reiff, that this review was responsible for the suicide.) Even Kenner’s stupid review wasn’t a total pan, though: he praised the last third of *Divorcing*, reasonably, as “tantalizing and coherent.”

So much for the ridiculous, pernicious idea that Susan Taubes had been living a happy, fulfilled life until a bad book review upset her so much that she killed herself. (Indeed, news reports noted that Taubes’ had “been despondent for more than a year,” according to notes found in her purse after her death, and Reiff reports that several weeks before the suicide, before the reviews were published, Taubes wrote in her journal, “In about two weeks I will drown myself.”)

What about the other link we might make between the novel and real life? None of the critics or reporters who have suggested a link between the novel’s reception and Taubes’ suicide have asked a question that, at least after #metoo, seems obvious: Might the fictional husband
whose treatment leads Sophie to contemplate suicide repeatedly, culminating in scenes in which she is dead, be telling us something about the real-life man whose ex-wife committed suicide in November 1969? As far as I can tell, no one has ever suggested in print, even hypothetically, that the rabbi and Jewish Studies scholar Jacob Taubes, if his conduct had been similar to that of Ezra Blind in the novel, might bear some culpability for what happened to his ex-wife.

On the contrary, a 1969 wire story about Susan Taubes’ suicide did not mention Taubes’ ex-husband at all, nor did a piece about her death in the Detroit Free Press. The previously mentioned “Novel Panned” article simply noted, without naming him or saying anything else about him, that the dead author’s “former husband is a university professor in West Germany.” None of this seems to have seriously affected Jacob Taubes’ professional opportunities while he was alive, or his reputation after his death in 1987. For decades after the publication of Divorcing, Taubes was employed as a respected professor at the Free University of Berlin, where he taught and mentored many students. Even after his death in 1987, his reputation continued to grow: Stanford University Press published translations of two of his books in the 2000s, calling him “One of the great Jewish intellectuals of the twentieth century,” and Columbia’s edition of his letters to Carl Schmitt describe him as “a philosopher, rabbi, religious historian, and Gnostic.” He has been the subject of several respectful studies, which either ignore his personal life entirely so as to focus on his philosophical and theological writing, or which briefly acknowledge that he was “sad and sick” before turning to focus on his philosophical and theological writing. In the introduction to the new edition of Divorcing, Reiff notes that Jacob Taubes was well-known for his “his charm, intelligence, cruelty, and priapism,” and that he was “impossible… and worse, especially toward women,” but dispenses with the subject with that vague phrase (what exactly is worse than impossible?). It is particularly noteworthy that Jacob
Taubes has been the kind of academic celebrity whom graduate students in Jewish Studies, at least, are all supposed to have heard about and thought about and taken seriously, if not always for his own work and ideas, then certainly for his influence on a whole generation of critical theorists, and in particular, per Wikipedia, on “Giorgio Agamben, Susan Sontag, Avital Ronell, Marshall Berman, Babette Babich, Aleida and Jan Assmann, Amos Funkenstein and Peter Sloterdijk.”

The degree to which Jacob Taubes’ (potentially? allegedly?) abusive treatment of Susan Taubes goes unmentioned in discussions of his legacy seems particularly strange because he is reported to have insisted that he was, in fact, responsible for his ex-wife’s death. In a memoir, the philosopher Babette Babich’s recalls Jacob Taubes telling her—in the 1980s, in his office at the Free University in Berlin—that she, Babich, “looked ‘just like’ his former wife” who, “he declared with a strange satisfaction, as if it were somehow to his credit, had taken her life, walking into the ocean, as he put it, when he left her to marry” another woman. It is noteworthy that, according to Babich’s account, Jacob Taubes took pride in having impelled to Susan Taubes to commit suicide (discussing it with “satisfaction … as if it were somehow to his credit”), and also, according to Babich’s account at least, like Ezra Blind, Jacob Taubes did not take seriously the contention, made explicitly and at length in Divorcing, that being married to a man very much like him was so harrowing that death could seem preferable.

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What would it mean to say that the one of the first facts one should know about Jacob Taubes is that he was an abusive husband who terrorized his wife until she committed suicide?
Of course, many people may not feel comfortable stating it as a fact: *Divorcing* is a novel. It presents itself as fiction, with its paratexts. It is fiction even though it has been read as autobiographical fiction and even though, within it, the character Sophie says that the book *she* is writing is “not really fiction” (122). The novel includes many scenes that cannot describe actual events, in which the dead speak, in which characters transcend space and time. It is thoroughly fictional, which in some common sense and juridical understandings of the categories, means that it cannot function as testimony.¹²

And yet, thanks to work of scholars like Leigh Gilmore, we also know that women who have testified about the misogynistic abuse they have suffered have been often been attacked, and that many women have understood that, because of those dynamics, they need to share information about abuse using means that protect them from such attacks, like whisper networks.¹³ We also know that the very genre of the roman *a clef* has, for hundreds of years, been one of these alternative means, relied upon by women writers who have felt (in many cases because they depend on abusive men and those men’s allies for the opportunity to compose, publish, and distribute their work) that they cannot otherwise tell the truth about abuses they have suffered at the hands of those powerful men.¹⁴

With all of that in mind, can we at least consider, in a speculative or exploratory way, the possibility that Susan Taubes may have been a victim of spousal abuse who attempted to testify publicly about her experience of abuse? If so, the real tragedy of her novel’s reception may not have been that a few of the reviews the novel received were not especially glowing in their praise, but rather that none of the reviews took seriously the novel’s presentation of the way a husband can terrorize the woman who relies on him. From this perspective, furthermore, it might seem that more lasting than the violence done to Susan Taubes by Kenner’s misogynistic review
was the violence done by Sontag’s insistence that it was Kenner’s review (rather than a history of depression, exacerbated or even caused by abuse) that led to her suicide.

If we, or you, are willing to accept that much… well, then what? All the primary players in this drama—Susan Taubes, Jacob Taubes, Susan Sontag—are dead. I was asked by a reader of an earlier version of this essay whether I want to call for Jacob Taubes to be “cancelled,” and even aside from all the qualms I have about that term and the annoying ways it is being trotted out to undermine long-overdue and deeply sympathetic calls for justice and equity against repellant and criminal behavior, I confess that I do not understand what it would mean to “cancel” a philosopher who published not much and has been dead for more than three decades.

As I draft this particular version of this essay, what occurs to me to suggest is that perhaps the takeaway from this way of thinking about Divorcing and Susan Taubes should be (and I will phrase this in the first-person, because I’m not sure enough of it to request anyone to join me in it) to transform the way that I read the line, in Jacob Taubes’ Wikipedia entry, that he “has influenced many contemporary thinkers such as Giorgio Agamben, Susan Sontag, Avital Ronell, Marshall Berman, Babette Babich, Aleida and Jan Assmann, Amos Funkenstein and Peter Sloterdijk.” While the obvious intended implication of that sentence is that Jacob Taubes deserves credit for having influenced those “thinkers,” another way to read it is as a call for skepticism of those intellectuals, individually, and of the system of patronage that has turned several of them into academic stars.15 In recent years, we have been presented with other reasons to be skeptical of any implicit or explicit claim that, for example, Avital Ronell might make for being an arbiter of moral, intellectual, or aesthetic value.16 Perhaps the story of Susan Taubes might be another reason to doubt that such figures deserve the air of authority that they have been granted, at least in some corners of academia, on the basis of their associations.


See, e.g., Yashi Banymadhub, “The tortued artist is a dangerous myth,” *Independent* (October 10, 2018), link.


Rieff, “Anguish and Suffering.”


Nitzan Lebovic, review of Taubes, *From Cult to Culture: Fragments Toward a Critique of Historical Reason and Occidental Eschatology, H-Judaic* (March 2011), link.


There is, of course, a vast critical discourse (not least in and around representations of the Holocaust) about the status of fiction as testimony, but even in the cases where scholars argue most strenuously for the potential testimonial value of fiction, I don’t know of a case where a scholar intended this literally, as in, introducing a novel into a legal proceeding as evidence of events that took place in the real world.


Caroline Lamb’s foreword to *Glenarvon* (1816), her roman à clef about Lord Byron, noted that “those who have been cruelly attacked will use the means of resistance which are within their reach.” See Lauren McCoy, “Literary Gossip: Caroline Lamb’s *Glenarvon* and the roman a clef,” *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 27:1 (2014): 128-50. McCoy notes that “the roman a clef allows discounted voices ... a space to tell their stories, challenging more established narratives” (129). In *The Art of Scandal: Modernism, Libel Law, and the Roman à Clef* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), Sean Latham emarks upon the many “women writers [who] found themselves in a position similar to [Virginia] Woolf’s: subject to sexual abuse and manipulation, uncertain about how to access the public sphere with the same freedom and confidence as the men around them, and yet eager to claim a room of their own” (157).
