

# *Swimming in a Sea of Death*: Reviewers Respond to a Journalist's Work of Mourning With Humour

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In an article for the *New York Review of Books* entitled 'For sorrow there is no remedy', author and critic Julian Barnes (2011) makes this astute observation: 'In some ways, autobiographical accounts of grief are unfalsifiable, and therefore unreviewable by any normal criteria.' While Barnes is largely referring to Joyce Carol Oates's *A Widow's Story: A Memoir* (2011), his statement highlights a reticence that can inhibit critical reviews of works of mourning. Other texts exploring less personal and poignant themes are subjected to analytical and exacting commentary; the burgeoning field of memoir recounting the death of a family member is publicly quarantined from this.

After his mother, the American writer and film maker, Susan Sontag (1933-2004), died, David Rieff – an acclaimed investigative journalist, author and literary editor – turned to memoir to reflect on the final months of her life. Rieff, whose literary reputation had long been established through polemical prose on humanitarian issues, war and politics appearing in high profile publications such as *The New York Times*, *Le Monde*, *The Atlantic*, and *Harper's*, typically received reverential regard for his autobiographical work, *Swimming in a Sea of Death: A Son's Memoir* (2008).

This chapter draws attention to a range of dissenting critiques featured in selected newspapers and online publications that refused to be constrained by either Rieff's literary lineage or the pathos of his prose. Instead, these selected reviews employed unanticipated humour and wit to appraise and question the motivation and merit of his memoir.

## **A puzzling choice?**

There are few, if any, funny lines or anecdotes recorded in journalist David Rieff's memoir *Swimming in a Sea of Death: A Son's Memoir*. Perhaps the wittiest observation about death comes from his sourcing of quotes:

There was an eighteenth century French writer who wrote to a friend asking 'Why, hating life as I do, do I fear death so much?' That was Larkin's perspective, too. It was even Canetti's when he wrote, 'One should not confuse the craving for life with endorsement of it' (Rieff 2008: 14-15).

Despite these wry observations attributed to other writers, his memoir is largely freighted with anxieties around the way in which his mother, Susan Sontag, died. It is a text given over to him working through feelings of guilt and complicity in not engaging in honest conversations about her health status, thereby partly facilitating her avoidant responses to a terminal illness.

Naturally, Rieff reserves the right to treat such matters with deep solemnity and regret without a hovering readerly expectation demanding moments of light relief or witty rejoinders. So, respecting his right to choose a style and tone fit for the memoir's purpose, it may seem a puzzling choice to select Rieff's autobiographical writing as a focal point for a chapter exploring humour in journalism. However, my interest lies not in analysing the humour (or absence thereof) contained within Rieff's recount, but exploring the way in which works of mourning can constrain journalists who might wish to draw on humour to write unfavourable reviews of texts that deal with the pathos of death. And importantly here, to draw attention to those rare reviewers who, despite the solemnity of Rieff's content, refuse to quarantine the memoir from the practices of witty and dissenting critique.

### **'Discussing the undiscussable'**

In the December 1994 edition of the *New Yorker*, dance critic Arlene Croce offers this riposte to a performance premiering at the Brooklyn Academy of Music: 'I have not seen Bill T. Jones's "Still/Here" and have no plans to review it' (Croce 1994: 54). She titles her provocative essay 'Discussing the undiscussable' and proceeds to outline her aversion to assessing a work incorporating video footage of ill people who had participated in workshops that Jones had led. During the mixed media choreographed performance of 'Still/Here' the audience functions as witnesses for people with a life-threatening illness. Croce's chief complaint is that 'by working dying people into his act Jones is putting himself beyond the reach of criticism' (ibid). Her critique of Jones and his choice of subject matter is founded on her assertion that 'victim' art is being popularised and valorised, particularly works relating to AIDS. In Croce's estimation:

Instead of compassion, these performers induce, and even invite, a cozy kind of complicity. When a victim artist finds his or her public, a perfect, mutually exclusive union is formed which no critic may put asunder (ibid: 55).

With the seriousness of the subject matter dominating such performances, she trenchantly protests over what she considers the marginalisation of the critic,

and highlights examples of artists such as Jones who are seen to 'have effectively disarmed criticism' (ibid: 58). The disarming of criticism, as Croce contends, is due to the privileging of the performer and their work above artistic standards because of the vulnerable state of their corporeality. They become, she suggests, off-limits because to critique the work is to pass judgement directly and inextricably on their embodied selves. With this conflation, and following Croce's line of argument, such artists are not then purely performing an aesthetic work, but are inherently performing *themselves*. For Croce, narrative performances in these contexts elide the purview of criticism because she can only consider the participants as victims. As people narrate their real-life illnesses on stage (or use other creative modalities), Croce sees the critic as no longer being able to judge such work using objective measures. This, in part, could be seen as a refusal to challenge core readings about identity, instead favouring the argument that 'When it comes to our identities, narrative is not merely *about* self, but is rather in some profound way a constituent part *of* self' (Eakin 2008: 2, emphasis in the original).

While Croce's essay cogently outlines reasons for not writing a review of Jones's work, her treatise invited criticism about a perceived failure to do her job. For example, Bordwell offers this strong rebuttal: 'How, I wondered upon reading "Discussing the undiscussable", could such a reputable dance critic summarily dismiss this work, sight unseen?' (1998: 369). Bordwell's concern typifies the standard view that to be eligible to critique a work of any kind one must have *personally* engaged with it first.

Whilst I am sympathetic towards Bordwell's view on what should constitute one's eligibility for writing critiques, Croce's essay, nonetheless, pertinently raises the notion that some works, due to their sombre and personal subject matter, evade the exacting criteria of criticism. The trademark wit, humour and irony often drawn on by a reviewer, and then unsparingly applied to texts under review, is often conspicuously avoided when the work is about a terminal illness or serves as an emotional testament to a mourning process. As Carroll argues in relation to humour: 'Emotions are appraisals directed at particular objects that are assessed in light of certain criteria or appropriateness and which cause certain phenomenological and/or physiological states in the subject undergoing the emotion' (2014: 5). This idea of 'certain criteria or appropriateness' might also be referenced to a reviewer's wit and humour not being seen as acceptable modes of address when assessing certain texts. Hence, with this kind of censoring or self-regulation in play, a text with sombre and melancholy content related to terminal illnesses could easily become artificially elevated and revered because of a reluctance to judge it primarily on artistic values.

### **'Confessions of a book reviewer'**

While Croce registers particular views on her role as a dance critic, George Orwell, writing in 1946, offered his own witty perspective on the book reviewer:

Until one has some kind of professional relationship with books one does not discover how bad the majority of them are. In much more than nine cases out of ten the only objectively truthful criticism would be 'This book is worthless', while the truth about the reviewer's own reaction would probably be 'This book does not interest me in any way, and I would not write about it unless I were paid to.' But the public will not pay to read that kind of thing. Why should they? They want some kind of guide to the books they are asked to read, and they want some kind of evaluation (Orwell 1970 [1946]: 217-218).

Depicted here is the portrait of a jaded 'hack' whose truthful and objective criticism is curtailed by the pragmatism of serving the reading public what it wants to hear. Orwell's portrait of the book reviewer is that of a professional writer/journalist who is paid by a newspaper editor to produce copy that will ultimately satisfy consumers. However, in more contemporary times, the specialised or professionalised nature of the review is being challenged for primacy, as literary scholar and critic Morris Dickstein highlights:

The professional reviewer, who has a literary identity, who had to meet some editor's exacting standard, has effectively been replaced by the Amazon reviewer, the paying customer, at times ingenious, assiduous, and highly motivated, more often banal, obtuse, and blankly opinionated (Ciabattari 2011).

While the role of the professional reviewer now co-exists with amateur World Wide Web posts found on commercial book sites and blogs, there are still nonetheless important and ongoing conversations about the role of literary reviewers. In a newspaper article entitled 'The role of the book critic', Tom Payne begins his piece with this humorous reference:

'Don't write crap.' That is what Julia Gillard, the Australian Prime Minister, offered recently as a contribution to the debate on the responsibilities of journalism. Since all pages of newspapers are under scrutiny these days, it's worth remembering what the duties of literary critics are (2011).

While it is seen as paramount for journalists (and book critics) not to 'write crap', this duty of fearless honesty may be compromised, as Croce would suggest, when the work under review seems to be beyond criticism. However, I would argue that books cannot put themselves *beyond* a reviewer's critique. Rather, it is the reviewer who deliberately, or inadvertently, chooses to sanction or frame work in particular ways, and who decides when and where to draw on humour and wit as critical tools in responding to specific texts, even ones mediating the seriousness of death.

### **Reviewing the unreviewable**

In his timely review 'For sorrow there is no remedy' (2011), Julian Barnes provides an insight into the impact of a heightened sense of mortality:

Of course, at one level we know that we shall die, but death has come to be looked upon more as a medical failure than a human norm. It increasingly happens away from the home, in hospital, and is handled by a series of outside specialists – a matter for the professionals. But afterwards we, the amateurs, the grief-struck, are left to deal with it this unique banal thing as best we can (2011).

Because it is often 'the grief-struck' who reactively write memoirs as a meaning-making exercise for the loss of their loved one, critics can be disarmed by the sincere nature of such testimonial enterprises. The representation of death, and subsequent mourning, can serve as inhibitors to the assiduous analysis and witty critique that might normally mark a book review in other circumstances. As Barnes suggests: 'In some ways, autobiographical accounts of grief are unfalsifiable, and therefore unreviewable by any normal criteria' (ibid). The well-established criteria of 'all gloves off' can be superseded by a reviewer's impulse to protect such accounts of grief from an ironic or witty gaze or retort. This can be evidenced by the way in which memoirs dealing with terminal illnesses are frequently quarantined from scathing or humorous criticism; their virtues are argued in psycho-social terms rather than literary ones.

Interestingly, in her scholarship on illness narratives and their relationship to the academy, Ann Jerecic notes that 'since their ascendance, these narratives have shifted the boundaries of literary study' (2012: 2). By this she means 'the medical humanists who teach literature in medical schools and centers have drawn attention to how narratives about suffering sustain individuals and communities' (2012: 2-3).

Importantly, she makes the distinction that while medical practitioners are encouraged to respond to patient or family stories with 'respect and understanding' (ibid: 3), this dignified approach does not always describe the ways such texts are treated by academics skilled in the field of literary criticism. However, from my general observation, the kind of literary critique carried out by industry practitioners such as professional journalists or reviewers tends not to ascribe automatically the same hermeneutics of suspicion to illness narratives that those working in academe might. Instead, they look for ways to affirm the writer's bravery, and dutifully assign the autobiographical text an added personal, social or political value. As Couser notes '... memoir now rivals fiction in popularity and critical esteem and exceeds it in cultural currency' (2012: 3). In professionalised book review columns, illness memoir, more often than not, is typically read and circulated as offering an invaluable personal and cultural contribution.

### Our last great taboo

Returning to the example of *Swimming in a Sea of Death: A Son's Memoir*, one can see the particular ways in which reviewers choose to ennoble the work rather than lampoon it. For example, Penelope Lively's review for the *Financial Times* dignifies Rieff's efforts:

In this fiercely honest and beautifully written memoir, her son David Rieff chronicles the last months of Sontag's life... . He writes with elegance and high intelligence; this book is a fine epitaph to his mother (2008).

Naturally, the original publisher of the memoir, Simon & Schuster, frames the memoir in this partisan way:

Both a memoir and an investigation, *Swimming in a Sea of Death* is David Rieff's loving tribute to his mother, the writer Susan Sontag, and her final battle with cancer. Rieff's brave, passionate, and unsparing witness of the last nine months of her life, from her initial diagnosis to her death, is both an intensely personal portrait of the relationship between a mother and a son, and a reflection on what it is like to try to help someone gravely ill in her fight to go on living and, when the time comes, to die with dignity (Simon & Schuster 2008).

The original publishers also position the memoir as having currency beyond the private and argue for its wider utilitarian value:

Drawing on his mother's heroic struggle, paying tribute to her doctors' ingenuity and faithfulness and determined to tell what happened to them all, *Swimming in a Sea of Death* subtly draws wider lessons that will be of value to others when they find themselves in the same situation (ibid).

The atmospheric of the publisher's review are replete with notions of heroism and pedagogical purpose. And other reviewers typically follow the Simon & Schuster lead, ably supported by Janet Malcolm's reverential endorsement that appears on the book's front cover: 'The delicacy and restraint of this book give it its painful force. It is a work of the highest originality and artistry – and truthfulness' (Rieff 2008).

Also positioning the book as a work of high seriousness are the paratextual interviews with Rieff, who establishes his literary pedigree. This strategically affords him protection from rigorous literary scrutiny with some reviewers:

It's complicated to talk about the influence on one's work. In my family it's a bit like in the *Godfather*; I was born into a family that was involved in a certain business, the business of writing, and I also always wanted to be a writer. My mother was a famous writer, my father was also a writer – at the time he wrote some important books in his field – and when you come from a family like that and you want to be a writer, you know that you need to write about things which they don't write about; so I suppose

there's a kind of negative effect, in the sense that I became a war correspondent because that was something they didn't write about. I'm sure that my mother influenced me, in the same way that I hope that I might also have influenced her (Alba 2009).

By establishing and authorising his writerly credentials, Rieff's comments can work to curtail critique on the literary qualities of the text. While his comments are at times self-effacing in relation to his own craft compared to that of his mother's, it is his references to death that offer potential reviewers a sense of anticipated (and expected) gravitas:

But the book is about those nine months. It's also about death to some extent. I'm not an idiot and I'm very well aware that if people are interested in this memoir it has mostly to do with my mother's celebrity and maybe a little bit to do with my reputation, but I don't think it's either a book only about the two people we happened and happen to be, but it's a book trying to think through what it is to be reconciled or unreconciled to death, which I don't think is the purview of one dead and one middle-aged American writer (Koval 2008).

With such framings of high seriousness, there is little scope in a reviewer's repertoire for the deploying of wit or irony when deconstructing the memoir. In an interview with Susan Wyndham at the Sydney Writers' Festival, Rieff represents the act of constructing his memoir as some kind of herculean task:

As a hard-nosed journalist and author, David Rieff has covered politics and wars in Cuba, Bosnia and the Middle East. Yet *Swimming in a Sea of Death*, a memoir about the death of his mother, Susan Sontag, is 'certainly the hardest thing I ever did as a writer' (2008).

When arguing the confessional value of his work in relation to his mother's death and the way in which she died, he notes that up until the act of writing the memoir '... I found I hadn't had my say' (ibid). In this sense, he cites his work as a formative right of reply:

Had my mother not involved me in telling her she was going to make it, or had there been any way of talking about the past that did not make her angry or sad, I suspect I wouldn't have written it. I don't have an Oprah-oriented bone in my body (ibid).

The memoir, while responding to (and correcting) his complicit and false affirmations during the last months of Sontag's illness, forms a therapeutic space in which Rieff narrates and expiates his guilt. When asked the question by Steve Paulson: 'Did not telling her the truth about her condition take a toll on you?' (2008) Rieff replies:

It exacted a tremendous price. I never got to say goodbye. I don't want to romanticize the end of life, but we never had the kinds of conversations I

would've liked to have had with her. Conversations about the past. I would've liked to have said certain things to her. We had a complicated relationship. There were very good times and very bad times between us. I would have liked to have gone beyond those before she left us. But that's impossible if you decide not to acknowledge the fact of dying. So that's the price I paid. But she made it very clear what she wanted. I didn't feel that my interests could be put ahead of that (ibid).

The positioning of his memoir, and in some ways himself as a victim engaged in a reparative act, makes it increasingly difficult to review the work in any other way than as an important *personal* intervention on his part. In the same interview he notes: 'I'm not a confessional person. This is all very new territory to me' (ibid). This claim of traversing emotionally 'new territory' can also work to engender empathy and potentially preserve him from reviews that might seek to negatively assess his writing ability.

In fact, the kinds of reviews that classically constellate around his memoir tend to identify with his diminished sense of self, and valorise his confessional efforts. Blake Morrison's review for the *Guardian* enshrines the solemn tenor of his memoir:

But the palace of guilt has many pavilions, and as well as suffering from survivor's guilt and filial guilt he's haunted by a sense of failure: 'I still cannot believe that there was nothing I could do to help.'... This is a sad and sombre book, but it's leavened with wise quotations. And, like Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*, its story of an embattled death-refusenik is the more affecting because it sheds no tears (2008).

Diane Johnson's and John Murray's particular representation of the memoir for the *New York Review of Books* imbues Rieff's work with the kind of seriousness that could work to place it outside witty critical redress:

Few of us lose a parent without regret and some self-reproach, some sense of things undone or injustices unredressed; it is a natural component of grief. The literature of memoirs by children of their parents, from *Father and Son* to *Mommie Dearest* – whether by Edmund Gosse or John Stuart Mill, Sean Wilentz or Francine du Plessix Gray – may be affectionate, angry, or ambivalent, but such works inevitably contain conscious or unconscious expressions of the reservations and differences essential in a parent-child relation if the child isn't to be submerged in the parent's tremendous identity. David Rieff's memoir of his mother, Susan Sontag, has all of these qualities, which perhaps accounts for its power beyond mere eulogy, elegy, or complaint (2008).

For a reviewer, it would be somewhat difficult to respond oppositionally (and humorously) to a text that is *singularly* and deliberately read as primarily contributing to, and advancing, social attitudes: 'Besides being an eloquent

record of grief, it raises a number of issues pertaining to cancer, its treatment, and our attitudes toward the language of illness and dying – subjects long of interest to Sontag herself (ibid). In other quarters, the memoir's merit is further argued on the grounds of its consciousness-raising:

Few of us weather the death of a loved one without second thoughts. Rieff's book is a moving account of his own situation, and might serve a larger cause by encouraging conversations about the complicated art of dying. Now that we're beyond shame in talking about sex and money, candor about dying could be our last great taboo (Benedict 2011).

Accordingly, texts that are largely positioned as breaking such taboos, can, at times, be afforded a type of exemption from stringent literary standards and subsequent ridicule.

### **'Rebellious humour mocks the social rules'**

There are prevailing social etiquettes around the taboo of dying, and humour used in these contexts can often be interpreted as transgressive. As Billig points out: 'Rebellious humour mocks the social rules, and, in its turn, can be seen to challenge, or rebel against, the rules' (2005: 202). However, there are a minority of critics and journalists who, while noting the serious import of Rieff's work, offer 'rebellious' critiques by drawing on wit and irony as ways of assessing the merits of *Swimming in a Sea of Death: A Son's Memoir*.

Adam Mars-Jones, in a column for the *Guardian* questioning Rieff's motivation and skill in writing the memoir, notes: 'Something graver than disillusionment emerges from these pages, though – the sense of a large figure being cut down to size by someone who resents his dependence and a competition that he can't win, even after her death' (2008). While, as Mars-Jones argues, 'Death disinhibits the survivors' (ibid), what is refreshing about his review is that death has not inhibited his commentary. Beyond the opening paragraphs, he displays a freedom to reflect colloquially and draw on witty analogy to accentuate his assessment of the memoir's literary value:

Being a mediocre writer isn't a crime, but it's certainly a crying shame on a project like this. If Sontag was still plying her peremptory pencil, any number of sentences here would have been underlined or simply crossed out: 'His silence was, as the cliché goes, eloquent'; 'Hard cases make bad law, as the cliché goes'; 'Feeling special is part of what makes us human.' She would have demanded a proper source for the 'old Oxbridge joke' that 'what's true is obvious and what isn't obvious isn't true', over which even the great god Google shrugs its shoulders helplessly. She would have queried his attribution of the 'gnomic aphorism "Less is more"' to Buckminster Fuller rather than Mies van der Rohe. As a young man, Rieff may have thought of writing as being the equivalent of a 'family olive oil business', but his pressing produces an off flavour (ibid).

Having cleverly undercut assumptions about Rieff's lineage and refused to offer the work a status not earned by its own compositional excellence, Mars-Jones uses wry comparison to validate his point. The 'off flavour' of the memoir is cogently summarised by Mars-Jones's chief complaint relating to the way Rieff handles Sontag's death: 'He places emphasis on his mother's loss of dignity in her last illness, and there is much about modern medicine which can dehumanise the patient, but he chips away at what is left' (ibid).

While Mars-Jones, like other reviewers, concedes that 'the terrain of *Swimming in a Sea of Death* is necessarily bleak' (ibid), he draws on irony to register the other concerns he has with the text:

Even the professional world mentioned at the beginning of the book soon disappears, although in the short term, he [Rieff] found himself discussing Middle East affairs with his mother, 'as if that mattered anymore'. Elsewhere he quotes, apparently with approval, her standard response to accusations of excessive seriousness ('If I don't believe in my own work, why should anyone else?'), but isn't tempted to imitate her (ibid).

Again, instead of the praise-worthy treatment of the memoir found in so many other reviews, Mars-Jones continues to use irony as a way of interrogating the complexity of the author's motivation for writing the book: 'Rieff is hard on himself, lamenting his tendency to be inhibited, withholding, morose, clumsy, cold, except that in this specialised context, every confession masks an accusation' (ibid). But, unlike a number of other reviews that interpret the text as a moving epitaph to Sontag, Mars-Jones makes reference to the concerns that Rieff raises about his mother's one-time companion Annie Leibovitz and the photographs she took and circulated of Sontag's ill and deceased body. In the memoir Rieff reflects: 'She would not have had time to mourn herself and to be become physically unrecognizable at the end even to herself, let alone humiliated posthumously by being "memorialized" that way in those carnival images taken by Annie Leibovitz' (2008: 150). In a witty critique of this treatment of Leibovitz, Mars-Jones responds:

He doesn't claim a symmetrical isolation for his mother but he edits her dance card. There are just two references to Annie Leibovitz. The first describes her as Sontag's 'on-again, off-again companion of many years', which makes her sound like an unsatisfactory family retainer (2008).

The tone and 'rebellious' use of Mars-Jones's wit stands in direct contrast to the frequently standardised and rarefied descriptions of the memoir, of which Diane Leach's partially serves as an exemplar:

Rieff is Susan Sontag's son. His memoir of her final battle with the cancer is eloquent, elegant and pained. Three years after the death of one of our great intellectuals, her son remains in a state of deep, guilty grief. His is not

a year of magical thinking; it is a lifetime ration, and we can only hope writing this book gave him some solace (2008).

Interestingly though, despite Leach's desire for Rieff to have experienced the consolation of mourning via the production of his text, she is still capable of deftly raising her own observational irony:

It's certain the cognoscenti will jump on this, a sort of Britney debacle for the intellectual set, but these same cognoscenti weren't there, rendering them unqualified judges. As a member of the unqualified party, I cannot help but notice Rieff's own set of posthumous carnival images that, if anything, expose his mother even more than her lover's photographs. It is Rieff who tells us what Sontag thought and felt during her last days and in quotes from earlier diaries. He describes her decline – this once brightest of intellectual lights, equally celebrated for her cerebral beauty – suffering from 'chemo brain', too weak to roll over in bed, 'covered in sores, incontinent, and half delirious...' carrying on to her final moments of life, which were blessedly peaceful (ibid).

In this isolated instance, Leach's critique is aligned more with her concern around the literary preservation of the patient's dignity than any protest about the actual quality of Rieff's writing. Conversely for Philip Hensher, like Mars-Jones, the matter of literary distinction proves vital. In his scrupulous review for the London-based *Daily Telegraph*, Hensher discerns:

A further justification that is often raised in these cases, however – that of the quality of the book – is sadly lacking here. In the end, you feel that, despite the best intentions, the most private of experiences has been described without producing something good enough (2008).

Again, adopting a colloquial and witty tone that declines to be disarmed by the serious themes of the book, he writes:

When one reads, early on in the book, the expression 'I thought to myself one has to conclude at a stroke that Rieff can't be the author of 'the highest originality and artistry' proclaimed by Janet Malcolm on the back cover (ibid).

For Hensher, the responsibility of the book critic remains governed by literary standards. He boldly asserts that: 'Clearly, Rieff wants to be a great writer, not just a peddler of reportage. Signs of this anxiety are everywhere' (ibid). Hensher refuses to provide Rieff with a free literary pass on the basis that the book deals with disease and dying. While Hensher does not overtly delight in pointing out the stylistic concerns he has with the text, as a diligent reviewer he continues to hold Rieff to ethical account:

There is no pleasure in dismissing a book that is, after all, the product of an appalling human experience, but it seems like bad taste to ask of the

medical profession and, indeed, of the terminal disease itself: 'Do you know who my mother is?'... This bad taste is epitomised in a final description of Montparnasse Cemetery, where Sontag is buried: Beckett, we are told, Emil Cioran, Jean-Paul Sartre, Raymond Aron and Charles Baudelaire are all buried nearby. One wants to suggest, politely, that a cemetery is not the same thing as a cocktail party (ibid).

Again, Hensher's wit and clever analogy adeptly point to and gently ridicule the vanity of celebrity, leaving the reader with a haunting reminder he sees as somewhat overlooked in Rieff's rendering: 'Between those graves, too, are the graves of people no one has ever heard of. Their lives might have been less distinguished than Sontag's; but their deaths were probably very much the same' (ibid). Clearly evident in Hensher's treatment of the memoir is Billig's conception that 'humour and seriousness remain inextricably linked' (2005: 243). Here the reviewer has an opportunity to use one in service of the other.

### **Who am I to pass judgement?**

For many reviewers, however, there is an initial reticence to use humour to critique a grave autobiographical account of the disease and death of a loved one. This hesitancy is gestured by Adam Begley's opening remarks in his book review for the *New York Observer*:

There's something obscene about sitting at a desk, in a chair that corrects the posture, sipping warm, sugary tea, yawning or scratching, barely aware of the fug of felt life, all the while getting ready to give the thumbs-up or thumbs-down to a book that records a mother's desperate losing battle against disease and her son's numb grief when she dies. I am in the realm of the living, foolishly taking it for granted as most of us do; David Rieff has been immersed in death ever since the day nearly four years ago when his mother, Susan Sontag, was diagnosed with a rare, particularly lethal cancer of the blood. Who am I to pass judgement on her mortal struggle, on his howl of pain? (2008).

Begley's question 'Who am I to pass judgement on her mortal struggle, on his howl of pain?' in some ways offers a temporary return to Croce's reluctance to discuss the undiscussable. Begley, however, is ultimately able to justify critiquing Rieff's work providing the following rationale:

But here it is, a book, a memoir: *Swimming in a Sea of Death* – it's out in the world now. No longer just an oozing wound Mr Rieff felt compelled to poke at in the privacy of his office (imagine him sitting there day after day, reliving the anguished stages of an unquiet death), it has become a cultural artefact, a document that tells us something about Susan Sontag, about David Rieff – and, of course, about ourselves (ibid).

Evident in his reflection is a cogent resolution of potential disparate resistances or instinctive (over)privileging when it comes to reviewing 'oozing

wounds'. For Begley, despite personal preferences to protect the feelings of the grieving, the duty of the reviewer/journalist necessarily comes to the fore when there is a 'cultural artefact' to be professionally assessed. In Begley's reckoning, once a writer has publicly circulated their work (and commercially profited from it) then the reviewer is entitled to apply some kind of rigorous criteria to the work.

Despite his initial reluctance, Begley soon enforces similar literary expectations to those of Mars-Jones and Hensher. He writes: 'Though in some ways profoundly intimate, it's a portrait curiously lacking in detail. We never get a good look at her. That could be because Mr Rieff has no talent for description, and it could also be a matter of scruple' (ibid). Adopting a similar tenor as Mars-Jones and Hensher, he casually uses ironic asides to clever effect: 'We learn nothing about Sontag the thinker and very little about Sontag the writer. (Very occasionally, Mr Rieff quotes from her journals to dazzling effect: Her brilliance is immediately apparent.)' (ibid).

And again, this longer passage demonstrates Begley's sustained commitment to using the clever parenthetical aside and rhetorical questions as modes for further interrogating Rieff's motives:

He writes, 'Had I been a better person, doubtless I would have had at least a somewhat more intelligent apprehension about what I should have done [i.e. for his mother]. But even to put my own failings at the center of this is a species of vanity.' It's hard not to supply an addendum: And what if Susan Sontag had been a 'better person'? Would she perhaps have made it easier for her son to be helpful? (ibid).

Most importantly here, Begley also performs the important task of inviting readers to fill in lacunae and actively locate the subtext in any text purporting to be, or positioning itself as, a work of memorialisation.

### **Books (and reviews) are not made out of emotions**

In briefly looking at the registers of Mars-Jones, Hensher and Begley in particular, one finds that these reviewers are able to hold in creative tension the seeming polar opposites of the memoir's memorialising and grim content with their own honed and reflexive journalistic wit. In this way their work (and readers' responses to their critiques) become illustrative of Billig's more general observation: 'Philosophers have called humans "the laughing animal". But we are the laughing animal only because we are also the unlaughing one' (2005: 7). In this sense, a reader may find that they are not invited to laugh at Rieff's personal circumstances, but perhaps smile wryly at the reviewers' clever assessments of his literary presentation of those circumstances.

In returning to Croce's notion of discussing the undiscussable, and by extension, reviewing the unreviewable, the contributions of Mars-Jones, Hensher and Begley offer an intervention of sorts. That is, they demonstrate the potential complex dichotomous unlaughing/laughing response to works of

mourning, and the staunch refusal to rarefy Rieff's memoir or place it beyond the normal bounds of criticism. Hensher astutely, and summarily, offers a template for this kind of reviewing praxis:

Degas once told Mallarmé that he had had an idea, and wanted to write a sonnet. Mallarmé replied, truthfully: 'Ce n'est point avec des idées que l'on fait des vers: c'est avec des mots.' No one will doubt the intensely felt emotions that drive this book. The trouble is that books are not made out of emotions; they are made, as Mallarmé said, out of words (2008).

Or as Begley so finally, simply (and sympathetically) puts it: 'To his credit, David Rieff is more of a son than a writer' (2008).

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