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Ann Jurecic

Illness as narrative

### Sontag's Narrative Legacy

Sontag's reevaluation of narrative explains a phenomenon that would otherwise appear to be a paradox to those who only know her early work: after the death of this writer who refused to pen her own illness memoir, her son David Rieff published a literary memoir about her final illness, and her partner of fifteen years Annie Leibovitz published a photographic memoir that documents Sontag's second cancer and her death. These accounts of their lives with Sontag during her illnesses and her death overtly help them come to terms with their grief and loss. While the younger Sontag would have been appalled by the sentiment that motivated these tributes, the older Sontag would more likely recognize the narratives as deeply felt efforts to make meaning of their pain.

Sontag died of leukemia on 28 December 2004, only nine months after her diagnosis. Her final decline was rapid, dramatic, and, as described by Rieff, tragic. On 28 March, she and Rieff were informed by a doctor that blood tests and a bone marrow biopsy were "completely unambiguous" (Rieff, *Swimming*, 7). The doctor's assessment of her chance of survival was equally unambiguous: no treatment could bring about cure or remission. Despite what she argued years earlier in *Illness as Metaphor* and *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, Sontag approached her illness as a battle. She was willing to endure any degree of pain to survive. Convinced that she had survived breast cancer because she had the most aggressive treatment, including surgery more radical than most doctors

recommended, she was certain that "when it came to cancer treatments more was always better" (Rieff, *Swimming*, 39). She found a doctor who said he did not think her case was hopeless, and that was what she needed to pursue a cure (32). Rieff believes that "her experience of surviving confirmed for her that sense of specialness that had sustained her from childhood forward. Contemptuous of the false optimism of the age . . . my mother nonetheless shared it, if only unconsciously, where the question of illness was concerned" (88). To his dismay, she made it clear she wanted him to sustain the fiction that she might survive, which he did.

One year after Sontag's death, Rieff published an essay in the *New York Times*, "Illness Is More than Metaphor," in which he described her fight to survive against the odds. Ten months later, in October 2006, Leibovitz launched an autobiographical retrospective of her professional and personal photographs, and published a companion book, *A Photographer's Life: 1990–2005*. The exhibit and book consider the years Leibovitz spent with Sontag, her friend, mentor, travel companion, and lover. Sontag is not the sole focus of the work, but she is a constant, grounding presence. While the exhibit of *A Photographer's Life* was touring museums in 2008, Rieff published *Swimming in a Sea of Death: A Son's Memoir*, in which he explores his mother's vehement refusal to accept her grim prognosis and his own unrelenting guilt about participating in her self-deception.

Although Rieff and Leibovitz are motivated by love and grief for the same woman, their reflections on her life barely intersect at all; in fact, they nearly write each other out of Sontag's life. In Leibovitz's collection of photographs, Rieff appears only once—sitting in a hospital room, framed by the doorway, absorbed in his newspaper, which he holds in front of him, a barrier between him and his mother's sick bed (*A Photographer's Life*). Leibovitz appears twice in Rieff's text. He belittles her relationship with Sontag, calling her his mother's "on-again, off-again companion of many years" (*Swimming in a Sea of Death*, 66). Later, in the text's angriest sentence, he attacks Leibovitz for including in her book a number of grim photographs of Sontag when she was ill and dying, and also of her body after death. He writes that his mother was "humiliated posthumously by being 'memorialized' . . . in those carnival images of celebrity death taken by Annie Leibovitz" (150).

While this may be all that Rieff can see through his grief and rage, Leibovitz uses her photographs to compose the story of a life in which work and love are integrated, and in which illness, aging, and death are acknowledged as natural and inevitable. Leibovitz's visual memoir brings together photographs from different parts of her own public and private life, but nearly all define her in relationship to others: her meticulously composed celebrity portraits, infor-

mal shots of her large, extended family, and intimate images of her life and travels with Sontag. While Leibovitz is clearly close to her parents and family, she gives Sontag a position of prominence as she constructs her visual narrative. The dust jacket shows a contact sheet of foggy landscapes, with two images of Leibovitz, the one in the center roughly outlined with red grease pencil. This portrait was taken by Sontag. That Leibovitz chose it for the cover of her memoir suggests that Sontag was key in shaping how Leibovitz saw herself from 1990 until Sontag's death. Leibovitz also places a portrait of Sontag in Petra, Jordan, as the first image in the book, an image that both celebrates and memorializes her. Sontag stands in silhouette, dwarfed by the walls of a dark stone gorge. Just beyond her, illuminated by bright sunlight, are the pillars of the ancient Treasury that are carved from a sandstone cliff. Leibovitz also punctuates the book with photographs of Sontag's drafts and notes for *The Volcano Lover*, which was composed in the early years of their relationship. On the page preceding Leibovitz's introduction, she places an image of Sontag resting on a bed in Milan, with notes, books, and manuscript pages strewn around her. Later there is an image from 1990 of pads and piles of paper covered with handwritten notes. Among the images from 1992 is a shot of a page from Sontag's draft on the glowing screen of an old Macintosh SE; the just-legible words describe the Cavaliere climbing Mount Vesuvius. In the final pages of *A Photographer's Life*, more notes for *The Volcano Lover* appear, followed by a photograph of Sontag climbing Vesuvius in 1992 and then an image of the mouth of the volcano, empty of human figures.

While these images of Sontag's work suggest Leibovitz's regard for her companion's art, the photographs of Sontag in the hospital during her second cancer and her final illness offended not just Reiff, but also many other critics and viewers.<sup>31</sup> Leibovitz puts on display photos of Sontag lying limp and glassy-eyed in a hospital bed after surgery for uterine sarcoma. Later pages show her during her final illness—bloated and unrecognizable—and finally laid out on a funeral bier in her burial gown. Is the publication of these images from their life together a violation of Sontag's dignity, an expression of intimacy, a commentary on death and relationship, or all of the above? In my view, Sontag's illnesses and death are dreadful to see, but they are framed and made meaningful in the context of Leibovitz's well-populated autobiography. In the pages that precede the images of Sontag's final illness Leibovitz places photographs of three generations of her extended family—from her daughter at age three to her father at ninety-one. The pages that follow Sontag's death suggest both the fragility and wonder of embodied life. They display photographs taken only six weeks later of Leibovitz's father's very different death—at home and in his wife's arms. This second death is directly followed in the text (although three

months later in the calendar), by the surrogate birth of Leibovitz's twin daughters, one named Susan, after Sontag, the other named Samuelle, after her father. Death is followed by renewal. Life goes on, differently.

It might appear that Leibovitz has simply folded death and loss into a commonplace therapeutic story about life changing and continuing. She has, after all, stated in interviews that putting the photographs into a narrative helped her come to terms with her loss.<sup>32</sup> While that may be a benefit of composing, Leibovitz can also be seen as engaging with the very situation that concerned Sontag in *Regarding the Pain of Others*. In that text, Sontag argues that "compassion can only flounder" in the face of large-scale suffering (79). Leibovitz shifts the focus to a more intimate scale and reveals that even in everyday life, knowledge of the other is mediated and inadequate. Thus, the composition of the photographs of Sontag in the hospital is rough, suggesting that these images of Sontag's decline are only a shadow of the real agony they depict. The camera clearly acts as a distancing device here—separating Leibovitz from full absorption in Sontag's misery. In presenting these images within a larger memoir, Leibovitz nevertheless makes the case to her audience that illness, pain, dying, and death are matters worth attention and examination. She reveals herself figuring out love and loss through the process of composing photographs and then arranging them to tell the story of her time with Sontag.

If Leibovitz's book engages the issues that concerned Sontag in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Reiff's *Swimming in a Sea of Death* engages his mother's earlier work, especially *Illness as Metaphor* and *AIDS and Its Metaphors*. He takes on the role of the rational one for whom his mother's death represents a failure of knowledge and a betrayal of truth. He is particularly disturbed by the limited language and stories that were available to shape her experience. He critiques how doctors talk to them, rails against euphemism and cliché, and offers an extended critique of a brochure from the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society for the "unconscionable . . . way in which the brochure is written in the language of hope, but in fact offers none to anyone reading it with care" (55). He admits he has no alternative to propose, but insists, "the gap . . . between language and reality is simply too great, and is actually a disservice to most patients and their loved ones, and, I suspect, even for physicians and nurses as well" (58). Reiff emulates his mother's characteristic search for what is "right." He is haunted because Sontag refused the medical certainty the leukemia would be fatal and wanted to be told there was hope she would survive. He is both convinced it would have been an act of extraordinary cruelty if he had refused to tell her she would survive and unforgiving of himself for affirming the hopeful lies that made it harder for her to die.

Reiff's essayistic memoir revises Sontag's early arguments against repre-

sentation. As Sontag argued against metaphors about illness even as she employed them, Rieff similarly doubts the value of memoir while he composes his own. He openly distrusts his motives for writing and his ability to tell the story: "Am I supposed to be ironic about what, in retrospect, was to be the last of her Indian summers, perhaps quoting the P. G. Wodehouse line about how 'unseen, in the background, Fate was quietly slipping the lead into the boxing glove' . . . ? Or am I to ascribe some special meaning to the intensity of her final years . . . ? Or is all of this just that vain, irrational human wish to ascribe meaning when no meaning is really on offer?" (18–19). No meanings are adequate, no narrative sufficient. He dismisses, as well, how palliative care specialists often speak of "reframing hope" with their dying patients, a phrase that means, he says, "helping mortally ill people find a way to shift from hoping to live to connecting in some final, profound way with their loved ones" (152). Skeptical about this invitation to choose a different narrative, he says, "'hope' is far too strong and sentimental a word. I hear something of the same wishful thinking that overwhelms when I hear the word 'closure.' There is no 'closure' on offer for the death of someone you love. Of that, at least, I'm certain. And I very much doubt that 'hope,' framed or reframed, offers much to someone trying to organize his or her thoughts and feelings in the shadow of extinction" (152). In refusing closure, a fundamental element of narrative, he assures that he will be unconsoled and inconsolable. Art's "solace," he maintains, is "also its mendacity" (170). Without reframing events, however, Rieff is trapped in his sense of personal failure. His writing does not lead to forgiveness or understanding, even though he desperately wants relief of some kind.

It is tempting to praise Leibovitz's visual memoir over Rieff's because she appears to achieve a resolution that Rieff either does not want or cannot attain. His mother's death forces him to confront what he does not know, and he cannot accept his inability to reason his way to certainty about the "right" course of action. While Rieff's text seems to emerge from the closed fist of frustration, Leibovitz sets forth her narrative on an open hand. It is also the case, however, that their projects are very different. Working from their own particular experiences, with contrasting artistic and analytical viewpoints and in the different media of photography and text, they present divergent interpretations of Sontag's death.

What can be learned from Leibovitz's and Rieff's discordant reflections on suffering and death? Significantly, the two people closest to Sontag chose to compose memoirs. This choice aligns their work more with her narratives, and less, especially in Leibovitz's case, with her early arguments against the representation of illness. Thus, their memoirs suggest that scholars in the medical humanities who have focused on her argument against metaphors have only

inherited half the story. These critics have missed that Sontag turned to narrative to address her sense of disconnection. Despite the radical differences of Leibovitz's and Rieff's memorial texts, together they confirm what Sontag asserted in *Regarding the Pain of Others* and enacted in her novels—that stories can be tools of understanding. In *Swimming in a Sea of Death*, Rieff creates a mantra of Joan Didion's statement: "we tell ourselves stories in order to live" (38, 43, 121).<sup>33</sup> If Sontag had recognized this earlier in her career, she might have tempered her stance against myths and metaphors of illness. This is not to say that she was entirely wrong in *Illness as Metaphor*; some stories do stigmatize. But others—such as her own account of the kingdoms of the sick and the well—make available new ways of thinking about the unthinkable. All those writers who quote "illness is the night-side of life" in their articles, Web pages, and blogs recognize the power of her metaphor, which is influential because it provides a narrative framework for engaging with the suffering of others (*Illness and AIDS* 3). In "misreading" the story of the kingdoms of the sick and well, they are actually true to Sontag's later belief that narratives can help us to understand.