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## Mortality as Muse: A Review of 'The Violet Hour: Great Writers at the End' by Katie Roiphe

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# Mortality as Muse

SUE NORTON

*The Violet Hour: Great Writers at the End*, by Katie Roiphe. New York: Dial Press, 2016.

Katie Roiphe's project in *The Violet Hour: Great Writers at the End* is to create for the reader a kind of anteroom to death. She investigates the ways in which highly articulate, artistic people, familiar to the public, approach their own imminent passing. In choosing her subjects, Roiphe asks, "If it's nearly impossible to capture the approach of death in words, who would have the most hope of doing it?" (9). With this criteria in mind, she turns to the last days and mortal musings of Susan Sontag, John Updike, Sigmund Freud, Dylan Thomas, and Maurice Sendak. In five engrossing chapters, she explores whether the impulse to render feelings imaginatively is a direct consequence of death's certainty and, if it is, whether death is to be understood as a kind of lifeblood.

With varying degrees of intention, these celebrated writers did indeed attempt to capture the approach of death in words. What makes their efforts curious is how they suggest that the acceptance of one's own mortality may be aided by eloquent rumination. In addition, their writings indicate that the skilled narration or depiction of the universal experience of death strikes writers and artists as being beneficial to others. Their renderings of terminal illness become sacrificial offerings to the public. Roiphe's probing of these renderings is an offering too: she wants to help us, and herself, to see into the death of things.

Annie Leibovitz's photographic chronicling of Susan Sontag's last days of life and, controversially, first days of death appears to have been a labor of love for both Leibovitz and Sontag. Sontag submitted willingly to the observation of

the camera, having once written that “to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed” (Sontag 4). She felt that “photographed images do not seem to be statements of the world so much as pieces of it,” whereas writing, by contrast, is only ever “an interpretation” (Sontag 4). By this logic, Sontag was allowing her trusted friend and former lover to appropriate her death and permit it to be looked upon. Roiphe details, with humane sensitivity, the queasiness that this decision provoked in Sontag’s intimate circle of family and friends. But however readers of Roiphe’s book may feel about the voyeuristic texture of Leibovitz’s unflinching gaze onto Sontag’s visible suffering, most will not fail to note that Sontag did *also* turn to the written word to articulate her experience of dying, an experience that she desperately wanted to forestall and even, ideally, to forgo.

Of the five writers covered by Roiphe in her book, Sontag is the one most resistant to her own death. She fought it to her last breath, steadfastly maintaining denial as a kind of arsenal. She had been seriously ill twice before and, from childhood onward, maintained a running discourse about death through her personal journals, short stories, and long works of nonfiction, including her book *Illness as Metaphor* (1978). Such commitment to the theme of mortality raises a dual question inherent to *The Violet Hour*: what does a writer *get* from the verbal narration of death, and what does a writer *give*?

Roiphe’s chapter on John Updike may best hint at an answer. Though Updike had established mortality as a recurring if not constant theme in his writing (consider his early and graphic poem “Dog’s Death”), we learn that upon initial comprehension of his terminal diagnosis with lung cancer, he did not reach for the pen—nor was he at all inclined to select a shade of blue for the cover of his soon-to-be-published *My Father’s Tears and Other Stories* (2009). His shock must simply have been too great. But a mere day or two later, he began composing verse from his hospital bed about, indeed, his hospital bed. The impulse of “*bringing news*,” as he once wrote himself in an article for AARP, had been prodded (124).

Based on conversations with his widow Martha, Roiphe tells us that Updike’s resolve to write, once he was discharged from the hospital, did falter again. But he yielded to Martha’s coaxing to produce, “Just one more book” (118). *Endpoint and Other Poems* (2009) was published posthumously. The fact of his dying would now become, in Roiphe’s words, his “fresh subject” (119). How it is that death, even one’s own death, can become so paradoxically invigorating a topic for a writer can perhaps be partly divined through constructions of audience. Roiphe reminds us of a section in *Self-Consciousness: Memoirs* (1989) when Updike, she writes, is “suddenly flattened by the idea” (123) that both he and his own young daughter,

for whom he has just built a dollhouse, will one day be dead. She also tells us that Updike's first wife, Mary, revealed to her that he kept "private" his preoccupations with mortality and, in Roiphe's words, "poured them into his writing, to be consumed by strangers, but did not discuss them with his family" (123). Roiphe reminds us, too, of a scene from *Marry Me: A Romance* (1976) when Jerry Conant becomes frustrated by his wife Ruth's drowsy unwillingness to indulge his late night anxieties about death.

What comes into view is the possibility that interior, "private" anxieties, such as a fear of death, are for artists and writers more easily, and perhaps more therapeutically, shared with anonymous readers than with loved ones. In domesticity, life is about keeping the show on the road. It's about building the dollhouse, getting a solid night's sleep. It's not about the ventilation of angst. "Woody Allen types" in Woody Allen films who kvetch about the void at the center of their beings do not, generally, inhabit harmonious relationships.

Nor, of course, did Dylan Thomas, whose marriage was fraught with volatility and whose parenting left much to be desired. He both courted death with his incessant drinking and other forms of indulgence, and resisted it vociferously in much of his writing—most famously in "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," in which he exhorts his dying father to "Rage, rage against the dying of the light." Roiphe details how Thomas's chronic vacillation between life at full throttle as a darling of the literati and his own "morbid and overblown fear of death" (188) made for constant tumult. He luxuriated in sick beds attended by mistresses and at other times turned to his wife, Caitlin, to comfort him with milk-soaked bread. Roiphe believes that "Thomas was the kind of man who wanted to stay out because to be at home in bed was to surrender to nothingness" (190). He was not at all private about his anxieties, telling a friend once at a very young age, "I've got death in me" (191). He used his dread of death freely and consciously to fuel his writing, but this verbal extravagance around the subject matter never brought him peace. Though he could assure his readers of eternal redemption in poems such as "And Death Shall Have No Dominion," Roiphe believes he maintained a sense of the "completely illusory control that language gives over life" (170).

This interest in the power and limits of language to help human beings reckon with death, whether as writers or as readers, is at the heart of Roiphe's analyses. Over the course of their lives, her five writers put emotional stock into the wishful idea that visual and verbal composition can mitigate what she refers to as the panic of death's approach (283). It was for such a reason, Roiphe believes, that Sigmund Freud wrote letters to his dearest confidantes detailing his state of mind and body

over his final days, having once famously and controversially argued in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) that “The aim of all life is death.” Roiphe tells us that he refused painkillers because he wanted “to be able to consider and analyze what remains to be considered and analyzed” (80). Thus, we are left with the impression that Freud’s dignity was deeply connected to his ability to articulate his own demise for the benefit of future clinicians and for posterity in general.

Maurice Sendak, likewise, was determined to delineate in both visual and narrative detail a recognizable terror of personal dissolution and to do so as a kind of offering. Roiphe’s analysis of his children’s stories suggests he believed that “kids are already scared, that what they crave is seeing their anxieties thrillingly laid out” (207). While her speculation here and elsewhere is almost certainly correct, sometimes her literary interpretations, especially with Sendak, seem superfluous and far too lengthy given the refined critical faculties of her probable readers.

For it is certainly the case that her study of these writers—along with James Salter, whom she interviewed shortly before his sudden death in 2015—is a literary as well as biographical endeavor. And while her line of inquiry is unfailingly sensitive and sincere, she may sometimes overreach as to the psychological motivations and general states of mind of her subjects. She concludes of Susan Sontag, for instance, that because she was known to deceive herself and others about such matters as her smoking and her lovers, she “mostly lied to protect the mythology she had constructed for herself” (50). Nevertheless, the full account of Roiphe’s research methodologies offered in her closing pages, where she details the degree of access she had to archives, letters, emails, and surviving loved ones, is crucial to her readers’ confidence that she is on reasonably sure footing to hypothesize about the intentions and longings of her subjects.

Regarding John Updike’s final days, for instance, Roiphe relies upon interviews, conversations, and emails with the author’s two wives, four children, and golfing buddy, as well as his correspondence. In addition, through close readings of numerous of Updike’s writings, she suggests that “there was in his later years a fascination with death, which almost eclipsed the fascination with sex” (141). These and other insights arise from her own informed intuition, though she credits others with helping sharpen her narrative regarding Updike’s religious faith and the manner in which he approached death. She believes that Updike and her other writers, whose portraits she found “hugely and strangely reassuring,” had in common “the power of an inspiring mind working on the problem” (15).

The problem, of course, is death, and the things that absorbed these inspiring minds in their last days—Sontag’s wild resistance, Freud’s determined smoking,

Updike's self-reflective verse, Thomas's drunken carousing, Sendak's intricate illustrations—reveal the coping mechanisms used by gifted writers and artists, masters of metaphor, to empower them to turn their final leaves, complete their final chapters.

But, of course, we can be no more certain than can Roiphe that her perceptions are reliable. Her meeting with Salter at his home is, for obvious reasons, the only unmediated, primary research she can offer. His advanced age and prolific writing life are what drew her to him. He died at the age of ninety of a sudden heart attack. What he shares with her in their interview is generous of spirit and lovely to savor. It will serve as a very nice final reward to Roiphe's readers for having accompanied her on her journey to understand, quite literally, the meanings of death.

#### WORK CITED

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