

# The Obituary of a Face: Lucy Grealy, Death Writing and Posthumous Harm

G. Thomas Couser  
Hofstra University, USA

On 12 December 2002, the *New York Times* published an obituary of Lucy Grealy: ‘Lucy Grealy, 39, who wrote a memoir on her disfigurement’. Without saying so directly, the obituary implied that Grealy committed suicide because of continued, or increasing, unhappiness about her disfigurement. It is hard to imagine an obituary more at odds with the book that made her famous (and thus earned her a *New York Times* obituary), *The autobiography of a face*. In her memoir Grealy chronicles a lifelong struggle to accept her face. Christopher Lehmann-Haupt’s obituary reconstructs her life in terms of the tritest script of disability – that of triumph over adversity – and then characterizes its ending as a tragic reversal of that presumed triumph.

Although it is rarely discussed as a significant form of life writing, the obituary is probably the genre most familiar to and most commonly consumed by the public. As such it is worthy of attention, and its implications are perhaps most interesting when it both depends on, and departs from, the self-written life of its subject, as this one does. Joel Feinberg’s theory of posthumous harm holds that, although it may be impossible (in some sense) to harm the dead since the dead are no longer persons/subjects, it is possible to harm their surviving interests. If one accepts Feinberg’s argument, then Lucy Grealy’s obituary can be seen as a particularly ironic example of death writing inflicting posthumous harm on its subject.

On 12 December 2002, the *New York Times*, often described as the ‘newspaper of record’, published an obituary under the following headline: ‘Lucy Grealy, 39, who wrote a memoir on her disfigurement.’ Needless to say, those of us who had read and liked – and in my case, taught – that memoir, *Autobiography of a face*, were shocked and saddened to hear of its author’s early death. Grealy was a minor literary celebrity, and the unanticipated death of any celebrity arouses curiosity about its circumstances and cause. On this

Address for correspondence: G. Thomas Couser, Department of English, Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY 11549-1000, USA; Email: enggtc@hofstra.edu

matter, the obituary's author, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, was at once circumspect and irresponsible. While declining to specify a cause of death, the obituary presented its circumstances in a sequence of sentences that implied one:

Lucy Grealy, the poet and essayist who wrote a noted 1994 memoir, *Autobiography of a face*, about her experience growing up with extreme facial disfigurement and repeated surgery to repair it, died at a friend's house in Manhattan. . . . No cause of death was announced. Friends said she had been despondent over operations she underwent two years ago. (2003: B7)

I think that many, if not most, readers of this short passage would infer that Grealy committed suicide and did so because of continued, or increasing, unhappiness about her appearance. To put it crudely, many would conclude that she killed herself because she thought she was ugly.

According to Alden Whitman, chief obituary writer for the *New York Times* in the 1960s and 1970s, 'a good obituary should not be a partisan document. . . . [rather] it ought to be as dispassionate and as many-sided as possible' (1971: 9). Historian Janice Hume characterizes the obituary in different but related terms, suggesting that it needs to balance two functions: chronicling and commemorating (2000: 14). By either set of standards, the Grealy obituary is deficient. While it is not 'partisan', it is hardly many-sided, and it chronicles at the expense of memorializing. Its main offence is to insinuate what it seems unwilling to state (that Grealy killed herself) and, further, to imply what could not be known (even had Grealy left a suicide note); namely, the reason or motive for the (implied) suicide. If Grealy died, as was rumoured, of a drug overdose, without leaving a suicide note, the obituary seems all the more irresponsible because of the inherently ambiguous nature of such a death.<sup>1</sup> Although the writer's intention may have been to protect Grealy's reputation from the scandal of death from a self-administered drug overdose, the obituary errs by inscribing its own very questionable interpretation of her death. It at once withholds and interprets facts about her death, replacing the stigma of illegal drug use with that of suicide. It is thus not only bad journalism – to the extent that it does not confine itself to the known facts; it is also bad life writing. Indeed, in my view the obituary is particularly insidious because it is the obituary of a memoirist. I shall argue that, by overwriting her memoir, it marginalizes her even as it memorializes her.

An accomplished writer who published poems and a book of essays, Grealy was best known for her memoir; it is doubtful that she would have been considered worthy of a *New York Times*

obituary had she not published *Autobiography of a face*, which gained her a large audience. (Indeed, the obituary's identifying clause, 'who wrote a memoir on her disfigurement', concedes that.) Grealy's disfigurement was undeniably central to her identity and her life course – as her memoir's striking title declared – but the thrust of her book, as I read it, was that she had begun to understand that her real life would not, as she had long believed, commence when her face was 'fixed' but rather that her fate was to live with a face that surgery could alter but never normalize. Lehmann-Haupt's obituary overwrites her literally painstaking self-representation in two distinct but related ways; its brief narrative of her life reconstructs it in terms of the tritest script of disability – that of victory over adversity – and then characterizes its ending as a tragic reversal of her presumed triumph. It suggests, then, that her reconciliation with her face was in the end transitory, if not illusory.

Debra Taylor observes that 'despite the fact that the obituary is such a vital component of the modern newspaper, it is not a highly valued form of journalism' (2001: 668).<sup>2</sup> And precisely because it is seen as mere 'journalism' – at least in the USA – it is infrequently regarded as a significant form of biography. Yet the obituary is undoubtedly the most widely disseminated life-writing genre and thus the one most widely consumed by the general public. (According to Alden Whitman, 'the obit page is the most widely read in most newspapers' (1971: 8).) I confess that, although I check the *New York Times* obituaries daily, I gave very little thought to the obituary as a form of life writing until recently. Such a popular genre is surely worthy of sustained critical attention. (It does get an entry in the *Encyclopedia of life writing*, but the bibliography is rather short, suggesting that the obituary has not received its due from scholars and critics (Taylor, 2001: 668).) Indeed, insofar as it is presumably universal among print cultures, it would seem ripe with potential for cross-cultural analysis. In any case, its implications are thrown into high relief when an obituary both depends on, and departs from, the self-written life of its subject, as Grealy's does.

I would not argue that autobiographers should be privileged subjects of obituaries. Indeed, I would not claim that obituaries should defer to their subjects' desires, no matter who those subjects are. In the USA a sharp distinction is made between the obituary 'proper' and the 'death notice'. Death notices are generally quite short; they are written and paid for by friends or relatives of their subjects, who typically do not merit obituaries; they are thus not journalism but a form of eulogy. In contrast, obituaries are news, the first draft of history; they are written by professional journalists employed by

newspapers or news agencies. Interestingly, this distinction is not observed in the UK: according to the American critic Elaine Showalter.

American obituary writing ... remains primarily a news item rather than an aspect of belles lettres. Lapses of days or even weeks between a death and an obituary are routine in the UK, while in the USA, timeliness is all-important.

(2000: 7)

... while American newspapers treat obituaries of public figures as occasions to record historical facts, British newspapers in the past 15 years have increasingly used the obituary as an interpretation of the life and career of the deceased, often written in the first person by someone who knew him or her.

(2000: 7)

The British obituary is often informal, chatty, anecdotal, even, affectionate, making no pretence of objectivity or comprehensiveness. Indeed, some British newspapers publish letters that supplement obituaries with additional stories in the obituary section. This practice, which moves the obituary even closer to eulogy, is unknown in American journalism.

In both countries, of course, obituaries are devoted to persons whose lives have a public dimension and therefore a claim on the public's attention. In the USA, however, the public is considered to have a 'right to know' things about 'public figures'; in the USA, then, celebrities have diminished rights to privacy and protection against defamation, whether written (libel) or oral (slander). According to Gibaldi:

Most states ... recognize the right of privacy in four respects:

1. Unreasonable intrusion on the seclusion of others
2. Appropriation of another's name or likeness without permission for advertising or purposes of trade
3. Unreasonable publicity of another's private life
4. Publicity placing another in a false light

(Gibaldi, 1998: 58)

But such strictures do not apply to individuals who are of 'public concern.' Similarly, whereas 'in law, defamation is a published false statement of fact about a living person that exposes the person to public hatred, ridicule, contempt, or disgrace, induces an evil opinion of the person in the minds of others, or deprives the person of friendly relations in society', to be found guilty of defamation of a public figure one must not only make a false statement, one must also know

it to be false and make it with malicious intent or reckless disregard for whether it is true (Gibaldi, 1998: 53–54). This diminished protection is considered the price of fame.

It would seem odd and unreasonable to grant autobiographers greater protection than other public figures from verbal harm. After all, autobiographers have made themselves public figures in a particularly deliberate and distinctive way – by publishing their own lives. One of the distinctive features of the so-called memoir boom of the 1990s – in the USA, at least – was the phenomenon of the ‘nobody’ memoir: the autobiographical volume by a hitherto unknown person, often quite young, often female, and often with a medical or psychiatric condition (e.g., Susanna Kaysen, who chronicled her stay in a mental hospital, and Lauren Slater, who wrote a book about her treatment for depression). Such subjects seem to have sacrificed, if not violated, their own privacy by the self-conscious publication of their private lives. Even if one could defame a dead person, memoirists would have no claim to special protection when it comes to obituary writing. And yet where legal issues are mooted (by death, for example), perhaps we are justified in looking past merely legal considerations. In any case, the predicament of those who become public figures by way of their self-representation highlights both the power and the weakness of the obituary as a form of life writing. Before I address how autobiographers may be especially vulnerable – though not necessarily privileged – subjects of obituaries, however, I would like to address a more fundamental issue: whether (and how) obituaries can harm their subjects.

## HARM TO THE DEAD

The broader question of whether it is possible to harm the dead at all may seem to have a self-evident answer. To me, the answer seems obvious: of course the dead can be harmed. But in discussing this issue with friends and colleagues, I have found that responses vary considerably. At a colloquium on ethics and life writing hosted by John Eakin at Indiana University in the fall of 2002, this issue aroused heated discussion, much to my surprise. Not only did I discover that others think quite differently from me; I also discovered that they consider their position – of course the dead *cannot* be harmed – to be self-evident. (My informal survey, then, confirms what poststructuralism claims: that ‘common sense’ is often neither common nor sense.)

Indeed, one member of the colloquium, Diane Middlebrook, author of a controversial biography of Anne Sexton, announced to

the rest of us, 'The dead belong to us.' It may be convenient, even necessary, for biographers to believe that. But the first-person plural is a particularly tricky deictic; in this biographer's pronouncement, its use may be an example not of the royal but of the imperial 'we'. Since, as John Maynard Keynes remarked, we are all dead in the long run, perhaps we (the living) should not distinguish ourselves too hastily and too sharply from the dead. In any event, I do not consider myself to be part of this biographer's 'we'. I do not consider the dead to belong to me; to pick up an earlier thread, I think that at most only some of the dead – namely, public figures – 'belong' to the living, to be disposed of as we see fit.

A provocative and, to me, compelling, account of the issue of harm to the dead can be found in Joel Feinberg's *Harm to others* (Volume 1 of *The moral limits of criminal law*). The position that the dead cannot be harmed, which is implied in the legal limitation of defamation to the living, appears to have the strength of tautology. According to Feinberg, 'in order to be harmed, common sense reminds us, a person must be in existence at the time, but death . . . is the cessation of one's existence, the first moment of a state of nonbeing, which is beyond harm or gain' (1984: 79). In this view, it is impossible to harm the dead, since the dead are no longer subjects – and '*there cannot be harm without a subject to be harmed*' (1984: 80). The drawback of this position becomes evident, however, when we realize that by its logic *killing* a person does not entail *harming* that person, since death obliterates the very subject whose existence is a precondition of harm. (It may be difficult, but it is not impossible, to kill someone without causing pain to that person in the process; and in this view, painless killing does not constitute harm to the subject.) This is a counterintuitive and ethically problematic position, to say the least. (So much for arguments against the death penalty – not to mention euthanasia.)

Feinberg's way out of this ethical dead end is through the definition of harm as 'setback interest', [which], 'given the universal interest in not dying, implies that death is a harm' (1984: 81). That is, to kill us *is* to harm us insofar as it entails a setback to our interests, which we can no longer advance when we are dead. Feinberg suggests that much of our dread of death stems from the realization that, once dead, 'we have no chance whatever of achieving those goals that are the ground of our ultimate interest', most of which 'require not simply that some result be brought about, but rather that it be brought about *by* us, or if not by us, then *for* us' (1984: 81).

Feinberg's argument that death harms the person leads him to the conclusion that posthumous harm is also possible. For 'if the prior

interests set back by death justify our characterization of death as a harm (even without a subject), then equally some of them [i.e., prior interests] warrant our speaking of certain later events as posthumous harms' (1984: 82). He thus arrives at the conclusion that undergirds my argument concerning Grealý's obituary:

We can think of some of a person's interests as surviving [her] death, just as some of the debts and claims of [her] estate do, and . . . in virtue of the defeat of these interests, either by death itself or by subsequent events, we can think of the person who was, as harmed . . . [She] is of course at this moment dead, but that does not prevent us from referring now, in the present tense, to [her] interests, if they are still capable of being blocked or fulfilled, just as we refer to [her] outstanding debts or claims, if they are still capable of being paid.

(1984: 83; I have taken the liberty of changing the gender of Feinberg's pronouns)

This argument provides a philosophical foundation – if one is needed – for the custom, in all cultures with which I am familiar, of treating most corpses with respect and for the legal institution of last wills and testaments, which enable one to enact one's desires after one's demise. In summary, while in some sense the dead are invulnerable to harm, their interests survive them, and a posthumous setback to those interests may be regarded as posthumous harm to them.

Feinberg's account of posthumous harm is pertinent to the obituary of Lucy Grealý in two respects. First, it helps to account for:

Why we grieve for a young vigorous 'victim of death' [her]self, and not only for those who loved [her] and depended on [her]. We grieve for [her] in virtue of [her] unfulfilled interests . . . The moment of death is the terminating boundary of one's biological life, but it is itself an important event within the life of one's future-oriented interests. When death thwarts an interest, the harm can be ascribed to the person who is no more, charged as it were to [her] 'moral estate'.

(1984: 85–86)

More important for my purposes, Feinberg nominates 'the interest every person has in [her] own reputation' as the best example of interests 'from the purely self-regarding category' (1984: 87). And he argues that, just as a setback to one's reputation of which one is unaware while alive constitutes harm, posthumous damage to one's reputation also involves harm (1984: 87). If one accepts Feinberg's argument – as I do – then the obituary is a particularly potent and fraught genre of life writing insofar as it is the genre that first represents the dead – who are not only, according to Feinberg, subject to

harm but intrinsically incapable of defending themselves against it. I will argue that Lucy Grealy's obituary is a particularly ironic example of death writing inflicting posthumous harm on its subject. But before turning to her case, I would like to expand on what I see as the special status of the obituary among life-writing genres.

### FIRST AND LAST WORDS

Life writing can be fundamentally divided into first-person and third-person forms, forms of autobiography and forms of (hetero)biography. Less obviously, but perhaps equally significantly, life writing can also be arranged along a time line; on this continuum the operative distinction is not between first- and third-person points of view but between first and last (i.e., earlier and later) words. In this schema, the death of the subject is decisive because it puts an end to life writing by, but not about, a particular subject. Indeed, biography may not only continue after the subject's death but may be stimulated and authorized by an event that may unseal lips and written records.

At this critical juncture on the time line are found those genres we might refer to as 'death writing'. Among these, in the USA the death notice may be first-person in point of view, as it is written by someone who knew the subject; the obituary proper is always third-person in point of view. The obituary occupies an especially, perhaps uniquely, important place among life-writing genres not only for the obvious reason that it announces and marks the passing of the subject but also because it may, at least temporarily, fix the subject's image in the public mind. Obituaries are not always the last words on their subjects, but they are such for the vast majority who never receive subsequent biographical treatment. At the very least, then, the obituary is the first *posthumous* word on its subject; as such, an obituary in a major medium like the *New York Times* in the USA or *The Times* of London in the UK may determine the image of its subject for a substantial post-mortem period – until and unless it is supplemented or supplanted by more extensive biographical consideration.

One irony of its status as the first last word is that the obituary is typically *ante-mortem* in composition, though never in publication. The very famous – those guaranteed obituaries – are thus subject to having their lives inscribed in the past tense well in advance of their deaths; their obituaries thus precede rather than follow their deaths, which simply confirm them: so-and-so is now actually dead. (Only satirical media may spell this out, as *The Onion* did recently to mark the passing, at the age of 100, of a man who served as South



Carolina's US Senator for some 50 years: 'Strom Thurmond finally, finally dies.')

Such canned obituaries, waiting to be precipitated into print, are akin to tombstones with the date of birth already engraved and followed by a hyphen; I like to think of them, then, as preposthumous. (One ironic consequence of such obituaries' being written well before the death of their subjects is that they are sometimes published after the deaths of their authors, as was the case with the *New York Times* obituary of Bob Hope. Like Thurmond, Hope was 100 when he died; his obituary was written by Vincent Canby, who predeceased him by three years.) According to Alden Whitman, a complex calculus determines when a celebrity's obituary is assigned. That calculus takes into account prominence and power (so in the USA, Presidents have top priority), age, health, the availability of materials, and 'complexity'. In addition, as Whitman delicately puts it, priority goes to those 'whose careers and lifeworks are substantially behind them and on whom, therefore, little updating is required at the moment of death' (1971: 9).

Along with newspaper clippings found in the appropriately named 'morgues', prospective obituary subjects sometimes serve as sources for their own death writing. Whitman denies that such interviews are 'ghoulish' or that he ever felt like an 'undertaker', let alone the Reaper himself: 'elderly people have reconciled themselves to mortality and are thus often willing to look back over their lives with a mixture of pride, candor, detachment, and even amusement' (1971: 10). Indeed, he says, 'from these conversations – all the more frank and open because the person knows that what he says is not for immediate quotation – emerges some of the best material' (1971: 12). Still, such luminaries may be justified in feeling a bit paranoid when they are approached by obituary writers ready to put the finishing touches on their stories. (The ultimate scoop, I suppose, would be to have your subject drop dead in midinterview and thus be in a position to offer an exclusive first-person account of the subject's last words.)

#### THE MESSAGE OF THE MEDIUM

Another inherent characteristic of the obituary calls for mention in transition to the obituary of Lucy Grealy: its brevity. Though length (and placement within an issue) are calibrated to their subjects' purported significance, obituaries are of necessity among the briefest forms of life writing. (It is their brevity, of course, that enables us to consume so many of them.) To twist an adage, life is long, the obituary short. Therein lies the challenge: the obituary must be condensed and

highly selective, but it should not be reductive or formulaic, as I think Grealy's is. Given her youth and the unexpectedness of her death, we can be sure that Grealy's obituary was composed posthumously and hurriedly, and we should take that into consideration in our judgement of it. Aside from interviews with friends, Lehmann-Haupt apparently gleaned much of the substance of his obituary from *The Times's* review of her memoir by Margo Jefferson. One senses that Lehmann-Haupt's account of Grealy's life is based not on his reading of her memoir but on his reading of a review of it. In any case, her life is gravely diminished by its simplistic representation.

The obituary credits Grealy with having survived the medical ordeal of dozens of operations from childhood well into her thirties and also the emotional ordeal of being stared at and ridiculed. But this account of her life renders it in the familiar and mildly oppressive formula of triumph over adversity, giving little sense of the complexity with which she came to view her own predicament. The problem with the script of overcoming adversity is that it represents disability entirely as a personal tragedy rather than a social and cultural construct, removing any stigma from the overcomer but not from the condition in question. In Grealy's case, rather than attending to the forces that shaped her, it attends only to the shape those forces threatened to impose on her. Such a script is patronizing. She is 'brave little Lucy' as long as she struggles, 'poor little Lucy' when she becomes 'despondent'. Such an account of her life denies social and cultural complicity in her predicament. Indeed, it tends to characterize her as a monomaniac, if not a narcissist – concerned only with her appearance (even as the obituary acknowledges that her book gives a very different impression of her).

Perhaps the review's most telling passage is this: ' "When my face gets fixed, then I'll start living," she said she told herself.' This is one of only two quotations from her book; presented uncontextualized and unqualified, as it is in the obituary, where it is given a paragraph of its own, it is somewhat misleading. Had Grealy believed that her life would begin only when her face was fixed, then she would not have had a life, and she could not have produced any 'life writing', much less the book she wrote. The story of such a life would have had to begin with her surgical normalization, but the book she wrote is about living with an unfixed and perhaps unfixable face. Indeed, if there is a false note in *The autobiography of a face*, it is the closure Grealy provides, somewhat suddenly and facilely, in its final pages, where she suggests that she had passed a turning point: 'And then I experienced a moment of the freedom I'd been practicing for behind my Halloween mask all those years ago. As a child I had expected my

liberation to come from getting a new face to put on, but now I saw it came from shedding something, shedding my image' (1995: 222).

As her obituary indicates, however, she continued to undergo operations on her face, confirming that the narrative's closure was somewhat forced, supplied perhaps in response to the presumed requirement of the form. In any case, the obituary's account of her death cancels out its own narrative of triumph and is at odds with her twin sister's testimony that, with the publication of her book, she 'saw her life in a different way. She felt [that] she had gotten her message out, that she had found herself, that her face had become acceptable' (Lehmann-Haupt, 2002: B7). The implication that she committed suicide out of despondency about her appearance suggests that the pride and determination the obituary ascribes to her were not enough in the end.

We should remember that Christopher Lehmann-Haupt had to produce his obituary under the pressure of a deadline and had to interview grieving colleagues, friends and relatives to do so. What I perceive as the shortcomings of his obituary are in part literally that, characteristics related to the brevity of the form rather than to his execution of it. Let me explain by reference to another bit of death writing about Lucy Grealy, a reminiscence published in *New York* magazine in March 2003, within months of her death, by a close friend, the writer Ann Patchett. Beneath its title appears the following text, as a tease:

In her dazzling *Autobiography of a face*, Lucy Grealy detailed her quest to reclaim her jaw, disfigured by cancer. Suddenly, she was the toast of literary New York, beloved for her quick wit and wild streak, saluted for her grit. But her endless surgeries left her so weak, impoverished, and dependent on drugs that even her dearest friends couldn't save her.  
(2003: 30)

Here again, a compact narrative inscribes her life as a complex tragic plot – a rise in fortune followed by a fatal decline; moreover, this summary suggests that this friend's memoir will corroborate, rather than challenge, the obituary's representation of her as a pathetic and possibly suicidal victim – of cancer, rather than of depression, or oppression.

In fact, Patchett's reminiscence does imply that Grealy's self-destructive behaviour, which involved heroin addiction, was suicidal in effect, if not in intent; to that extent it corroborates her obituary. (This is perhaps not surprising: Patchett may have been one of the friends interviewed for the obituary.) Yet her reminiscence is less disturbing to me than the obituary. Why? For one thing, it is evidently

written by someone who knew Grealy well and cared deeply about her. For another, it does not attribute her emotional trouble solely to her disfigurement. (The title, 'The face of pain', suggests that her emotional pain did not stem solely from her disfigurement.) Further, Patchett's story is long enough to contextualize Grealy's persistent pursuit of outer beauty and to suggest what was behind it. It begins, then, to supply what her obituary tends to elide or erase; it thus highlights the partiality and peculiarity of the obituary as a form of life writing. Reading Patchett's account made me realize how the obituary, despite the seemingly obligatory list of known survivors, is conventionally, if not inherently, non- or even anti-relational in its approach. Among life-writing genres, it isolates and individualizes its subject to an extreme degree.

So if Patchett's magazine memoir in effect confirms the obituary's implications about Grealy's death, by detailing her loneliness, depression and self-destructive habits, including addiction to prescribed painkillers and illegal drugs, it does so with greater authority and transparency than the obituary; at least it gives some biographical evidence for its interpretation. Also, and not incidentally, it suggests that Grealy's most significant disability was not her disfigurement, but clinical depression. This may have manifested itself in terms of feelings of ugliness, but must have been a function also of physiological factors – brain chemistry – and cultural factors – the cult of female beauty.

At the same time, I am somewhat troubled by Patchett's piece for some of the same reasons that I am troubled by the obituary. Both tend to reinforce a view of disability that is misleading and marginalizing. Portraying Grealy as triumphing over adversity or as succumbing to it by suicide are in the end not such radically different representations of her: they are two sides of the same coin, the comic and tragic versions of the same agon experienced by an atomistic individual. Both ignore the larger context of Grealy's disfigurement and the way in which it represents institutional and cultural oppression. For Grealy's problem was, even more than she seems to have acknowledged, not hers alone, and this may in fact be why her book had such broad appeal. For one thing, it was not cancer but its treatment that disfigured her; the face she wanted fixed was the face that state-of-the-art biomedicine gave her. For another, her predicament was merely an extreme version of a common one, especially among women – that of feeling a great deal, perhaps literally one's life, depends on presenting an acceptable, normal-symmetrical, if not beautiful, face to the world. One of the book's crucial revelations is that young Lucy first became aware of the anomaly of her appearance not spontaneously,

by regarding herself in the mirror, but by picking up on others' responses to her, including her mother's attempt to normalize her postchemotherapy appearance by providing her with a wig (1995: ch. 6). It was thus the metaphorical mirror of others' responses to her that first alerted her to the problem of her appearance, which a look in a literal mirror could only confirm (1995: 111–12).

Her book may thus be regarded as in part an attempt to deflect the stares to which she was subjected. One of its great virtues is to demonstrate, albeit not programmatically and perhaps not entirely intentionally, how indeterminate her face was, how differently it signified at successive stages of her life and in various institutional settings: in primary, secondary and postsecondary school; at home, at the hospital, at work. The testimony of her book is not that she considered herself finally a heroine or a victim but rather that she was continually renegotiating her 'face value' in changing circumstances. A crucial and saving epiphany was that 'Perhaps my face was a gift to be used toward understanding and enlightenment' (1995: 180). Using her face in that way was an endeavour that was not, and could not have been, concluded by the completion of her memoir, yet it is perhaps the foundation of its value. To come to terms with her face was to contest others' view(s) of it, to stare back, however modestly and indirectly.

To suggest otherwise is to deny the role of culture in what was undoubtedly an ordeal, but one that made her not only a writer but a life writer. What is wrong with the obituary – and the particular way it harms her – is the way it misreads her life, despite her having 'willed' it to us in death-defying print. This is not a matter of ruining her reputation – apparently, the obituary deliberately withheld what was felt to be a scandalous fact about her death – but rather of overwriting and oversimplifying her complex self-representation. So while I do not hold that memoirists have a 'right' to control their own posthumous images or deserve a privileged status as subjects of obituaries, I think that the fact that such a well-meaning obituary as Grealy's can so subtly but so drastically controvert her self-representation – setting back, I would say, her interest in 'getting her message out' – suggests that life writers are particularly prone to posthumous harm by their obituaries.

And that is partly because the obituary tends to review the life – particularly when death is early and unexpected – in terms of the circumstances of the death. Perhaps not surprisingly, but nevertheless problematically, death writing tends to privilege death, a single event rarely in control of the subject, giving it a disproportionate and often misleading significance.<sup>3</sup> The writing of the death threatens to rewrite the life and, in the case of autobiographers, also the subject's life

writing. The practice of interpreting the entire course of a subject's life in light of its ending is a convention presumably borrowed from literature that is fictive (i.e., the novel) and/or religious (i.e., hagiography); however, what makes sense in those genres, in which the ending is shaped intentionally and sometimes teleologically, does not necessarily make sense in secular life writing. Thus, Grealy's death – even if it had been a suicide – should not persuade us that her self-representation was false. But the situation of the obituary in the writing of a particular individual's life favours the overinterpretation of the ending. Unfortunately, it may thus tend to overwrite earlier self-representation and unduly shape later biographical representation. The misrepresentations inherent in obituaries and their unique significance in print cultures make them peculiarly likely to disfigure the dead.

## NOTES

1 According to Janice Hume, 'when medical science took hold in the USA in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, obituaries began listing more specific causes of death.' Some causes were effectively taboo – notably murder and suicide – but the reluctance to mention suicide as a cause of death has weakened significantly (2000: 143–44). The *New York Times* does report suicide as a cause of death under some circumstances. See, for example, the obituary of the artist Fred Sandback: 'Mr Sandback, who suffered from depression, committed suicide, said his wife, Amy Baker Sandback' (Johnson, 2003: para. 2).

2 In a piece called 'News of a lifetime', Max Frankel, a *New York Times* editor and columnist, acknowledged this, even as he exempted his own paper: 'In most newsrooms, obituary writing is thought to be work for neophytes or burned-out veterans. . . . On many days, the *New York Times* is a glorious exception. . . . The *Times* assigns obituaries to good writers, often those with direct knowledge of the person's achievements, and to sensitive editors who aim to balance candor and respect.' He also acknowledges that the British model is different: 'As a handful of British newspapers have repeatedly shown, obituaries should be written by articulate history buffs and affectionate biographers' (1995: 28).

3 This may not be so true in Britain; according to Elaine Showalter, whereas 'American newspapers describe the causes of death . . . British newspapers omit the medical details' (2000: para. 4).

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#### NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

**G. THOMAS COUSER** is a Professor of English and Director of Disability Studies at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York. His recent books are *Recovering bodies: illness, disability, and life writing* (Wisconsin, 1997) and *Vulnerable subjects: ethics and life writing* (Cornell, 2004). His work has been assigned in universities in Canada, the UK and New Zealand as well as the USA.