

The Art of the Obituary

Every now and again the poetic glow comes upon me, setting off an urge to write something other than my customary composition. I incline away from raw polemics, treatises, and bulls; and waltz into the world of *belles lettres*, where I devote myself to that curiously neglected literary genus, the obituary. Frankly stated, I glory in the solitary creative act of writing obituaries for the esteemed personages of our era. I say I glory in the act, because most of these trashy fellows have wrought a great deal of mischief, and I cannot wait to descant upon them as they trip headlong toward their eternal rewards. In the briefest period imaginable they have aided, abetted, and at times presided over the gutting of our society and the near bankrupting of our country.

New priorities, lush governmental subsidies, and the liberation of everything from aggrieved minorities to saucy ids were to assure us an era of incomparable joy. Well here we are ten or fifteen years after the great fevers set in, and about the only joy experienced in America is experienced by East Coast psychoanalysts gloating over their bank accounts. We have been victimized by charlatans, fanatics, and ignoramuses; and I itch to eulogize.

Unfortunately years have passed since a proper rogue exited for the hereafter. Say what you will about health care in America, my only complaint is that lately the healers have not provided me with a properly qualified carcass for my art. One cannot even rely on a public-spirited assassin. Oh the Republic abounds with assassins, but assassins devoted to the commonweal?—I ask you. There are some advanced societies where they can be counted on to practice their profession with prudence and dispatch. Even in yesteryear's America there were assassins who were at least drawn from the higher orders and who displayed education and tact—some were drawn from the arts. Alas, today they are more often than not pathetic lunatics, roaring with unappealing prejudices and a kind of upper atmosphere liberalism that emanates from National Public Radio and is seldom taken seriously by anyone save an occasional college professor and his obsequious graduate students. Such morons as Lee Harvey Oswald, Arthur Bremer, and now Citizen Fromme give all assassins a black eye, and anyway they never have the good taste to provide me with the kind of *corpus delicti* I seek to glorify.

So it is that when the poetic spirit arises I am forced to write without respect to the pathological condition of my subject. It is a fact that only intensifies my spirit of lamentation. In no way has it hampered my literary output. In fact my files bulge with unpublished obituaries

awaiting the cooperation of their subjects. Scoundrels from all walks of life appear in these files, and naturally politicians are well represented. Consider the following, inspired by the antics of a distinguished United States Senator whose identity shall remain masked until the day he departs for his Heavenly holiday:

"Senator George S. McSoandso passed away early this morning after a restless night during which he shouted hundreds of thousands of words from speeches he had given throughout his long political career. The end came clamorously as he began going through his famous 'The Sky Is Falling' speeches, speeches generally associated with his historically fruitless Presidential campaign. His wife told reporters this morning that the distinguished Senator had just broken into that famous cadenza of 'Come Home America' exhortations when, as she put it, 'I heard a gurgle and switched on the light just in time to see that look of earnest heroism that he always wore in public fade from his face to be replaced by the blank look of perfect innocence which he always wore during briefings with his aides and while watching educational television. I called it his open look. It was so characteristic.'

"Indeed it was. Senator McSoandso was widely known to be the most gullible man to enter public life since William Jennings Bryan. He would believe anything. Even the nocturnal haranguing was characteristic, for he was a nonstop haranguer. He harangued Americans every day of his long career, and all Washington knew he spouted the same witless sonorities in his sleep that he intoned on the floor of the Senate. He actually believed his own ardent exhortations, and early this morning it appears that the cumulative significance of all those monstrous testimonials suddenly burst into his mind's eye. It was too much for him. Doctors report he died of a massive coronary brought on by fright.

"I do not mean to imply that this gullible blatherskite was simply a dupe. He had his own grand design, but he would believe any idiotic canard that would make that design appear feasible and exigent for America. Eventually he took on more horror stories than his frail constitution could bear.

"What he hoped to achieve in his lifetime was government control over every detail of every American's life. He simply never trusted his fellows, and he lived in constant fear that they would do something horrible. What is more, he believed anyone who told him that they actually were doing horrible things.

"Oh those Americans who were drowning in poverty did not worry him. But give the Americano something to jingle in his

pockets, give him some responsibility or some respectability, and Senator McSoandso was in a fury to tie him down. Because he feared that free men were capable of any infamy, he confected a rattletrap system of government control; and because he needed to make this absurd system appear plausible he sought out paragons with which to dazzle us. He raised up one penurious despotism after another for our edification, and whether we nodded in appreciation or not Senator McSoandso bellowed for legislation that would render the American citizenry secure and manageable. His ideas were not unlike those of Mother Gandhi, and I have always suspected that were he to win the Presidency he would surely visit us with her form of government. Nevertheless the comparison ends with ideology; with intelligence the contrast begins. Senator McSoandso was a hopeless dolt.

"Still his orations and misadventures were always amusing. He could never get into the White House, and as the years wore on his oratory became more desperate and lunatic. He was always most amusing. I shall miss him."

That is the kind of loveliness I am capable of, but writing about one of the paradigmatic goo-goo despots is not my only ambition. I yearn to elegize freshly departed rock virtuosi, jet set professors, and philistine business tycoons, to name but a few. Let their hearts sputter and pop to a halt, let their juices cool for but a moment, and instantly I shall be committing wanton arpeggios on my Royal. Once again let me dip into my file; this time a rock star has breathed his last; again delicacy induces me to conceal the identity of the deceased.

"Internationally acclaimed rock star, John, died today at the age of thirty-six. Death was attributed to old age. John was one of the four Worms, a rock group that wrote and sang songs urging fraternity, equality, and crackpot socialism; though not one of them could ever get along with anyone, and each of them made more money than a Wall Street bond salesman. John was a nuisance all his life.

"He lived on a diet of high intensity vitamins, for he believed that one's body was the domicile of spirits. To kill and devour animals was not only unhealthy and unjust but also a desecration against one's spirits. John also renounced vegetables, for he claimed that he once heard a cornstalk sob when it was shorn of one of its ears. His pursuit of bodily health occasionally conflicted with his pursuit of mental well-being, for he spent much of his later years ingesting amphetamines, sniffing cocaine, and smoking hashish.

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David I. Meiselman

Taxing Away Our Economic Growth

(This article has been adapted from a speech given by Mr. Meiselman at The Alternative's Conference on the Future of the Corporation and Free Enterprise, in Washington, June 14.)

It has become common to use Britain's wretched economic performance and mismanagement to frighten Americans lest we end up in the same sorry mess of inflationary stagnation. You have all heard the dire warnings to the United States as well as the farewells to a sinking England. Thus, it will probably come as a surprise to most of you that since 1960 there has been more real economic growth per capita in the United Kingdom than in the United States.

Between 1960 and 1973, real output per employed person increased by an average of only 2.1% per year in the United States, while in the UK it increased by about 2.8% per year, or about a third more. These differences in growth may appear small in any one year, but they accumulate over the years, like compound interest, so that during that 13-year period the overall increase in output per employed person was about 43% in the United Kingdom compared with 31% in the United States.

I could easily make starker comparisons by using other countries. In Japan, for example, real output per employed person increased by 9.2% per year, or by a total of 214% over the 13 years. Even Italy, despite the repeated announcements of her demise, has flourished by comparison with the United States. Italian real output per capita increased an average of 5.7% per year, or 106% over the 13-year period.

I need not assail you with more num-

bers because I can easily summarize U.S. economic growth in the past twenty-five years or so and the principal views about it. For many years it was widely believed that the United States, presumably the productive wonder of the world and the blessed recipient of the touchstone of self-generating growth, would be able to follow the example of Al Capp's shmoo or the Good Lord's manna from heaven, and replace Adam Smith's unnecessarily dismal and pointlessly self-denying economics of scarcity with a new cheery economics of nonpolluting abundance, ease, and beauty. Necessary growth, like the rising of the sun, would—well, it would just happen. Growth was required because even a massive redistribution of income and wealth couldn't yield enough; the vast holdings of the Rockefeller family could hardly support the federal government for more than a few days.

But in this period, it turns out that the United States has experienced less growth in productivity than any other industrialized country in the Western world! To be sure, other countries started lower or suffered great and reparable destruction during World War II, but the large gap between the United States and other Western countries in real income per capita has narrowed considerably, even from pre-World War II levels. In some countries, real income per capita may now exceed that of the United States. As for the war argument, Canada suffered no direct war damage, yet Canada too has been growing faster than the United States.

What has the United States been doing so differently to result in such disappointing economic growth? One of the main reasons for our slowdown is that the

American economy has been devoting too many of its resources to consumption and to government and not enough of them to the capital formation which makes growth possible. In fact, of all the Western industrial countries, the United States has devoted the smallest fraction of its Gross National Product since 1960 to private capital formation. Total fixed investment, which includes housing, has been 17.5% of real output in the United States, compared with 22% in Canada, about 25% in France and Germany, and over 35% in Japan. Even the British have devoted a larger proportion of output to capital formation than we have. Furthermore, the differences between American and foreign capital formation would be even greater if we excluded housing from the comparisons and examined only investment in plant and equipment, inventories, and the like.

The Importance of Capital

It is no accident that the United States is lowest in both capital formation and economic growth. Output can usually increase only when technology improves or, with a given level of technology, when either more capital or more labor is used. Technical progress itself depends on capital formation, because technological improvements do not occur automatically; instead, they are typically the consequence of deliberate and planned research and development, a form of capital investment. And for a given level of technology, if there is little additional fixed capital, output can increase only when there are more labor inputs—from more people working, or from people working longer hours. The only depend-