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Capturing life - not death:

A case for burying the posthumous parallax

Abstract:

Australian newspapers, in recent years, have increased significantly the column space devoted to obituaries. Style and quality are erratic, however. Syndicated pieces from specialist writers in Britain and the United States appear alongside homespun obituaries submitted for publication by surviving family members or friends.

There is an apparent unwillingness, on the part of Australian editors, to encourage the writing of material which speaks critically of the dead. That reticence is at variance with emerging practice overseas, where there is frequently a concerted effort to 'get nearer the character of the person…to delve behind the curriculum vitae and by Description and anecdote convey what the lamented - or unlamented - one was ***really*** *like.' (Bowman 1997)*

*This article compares publication styles and policies, and examines (on the basis of the author's own experience) the challenges inherent in both the exercise and the teaching of the obituary ar*t.

Confronting the Posthumous Parallax

Obituaries written expressly for Australian consumption follow a safe, if distorted, path. I call it the 'posthumous parallax' - a bending of life histories towards all that is light and wholesome, away from anything that might reflect unfavourably on the dead.

In the past 12 months (since September 2000) I have studied 3000 newspaper obituaries published in Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom. Of those, 732 were written in Australia, for Australia; all 732 offered words of uncritical praise and gratitude on their subjects.

Such sentiments are, quite possibly, sincere. But this determination to write only well of the dead is, to an increasing degree, in conflict with practice elsewhere. My study has found growing evidence of a departure from the posthumous parallax, notably in obituaries published in the US and the UK. I have traced the adoption of a more candid approach back to appointment in 1986 of Hugh Massingberd as obituaries editor of the *Daily Telegraph* (UK). It has been said (Wilson, cited in Massingberd 1999) that he single-handedly transformed the once stuffy formula of the newspaper 'obit'. Under that hand, the *Telegraph* not only changed its style but also dedicated much more space - nearly a whole page every day, in fact - to obituaries.

The *Telegraph* was soon challenging the legendary reputation of *The Times* in this journalism genre. Obituarists of note now regard it as leading the field. British writer Tim Heald - recently commissioned to write, for the *Daily Express* files, an obituary of Prince Philip - finds that Massingberd's 1986-1994 *Telegraph* stewardship brought dramatic shifts in practice:

> Hugh changed everything, and then others such as *The Guardian* and *The Independent,* and even the *Mail* and *Express*, followed suit in their own particular ways. (Heald 2001)

He maintains that such frankness, especially as it is employed by the *Daily Telegraph*, has 'brought people back to life', and that:

> You can be much more critical in an obituary now…[and] abandon the hushed voice. You can actually attempt to give a genuine assessment in exactly the same way as you might if you were writing a profile on a living person. (Heald 2001)

In the United States a growing academic interest in the obituary as a form of literary journalism has led to the establishment in 1999 of the International Association of Obituarists. At its third annual conference, held in New Mexico this year, keynote speaker Steve Miller delivered a passionate argument against the posthumous parallax:

> There is a gap in our written culture. We need accounts that critically assess the impact of an individual's life…we must speak well of the dead, and we must speak ill of them too. If we are to learn from the dead, or enjoy their lives in a meaningful way, we must speak of them freely, think of them objectively and creatively, and report on them with honesty and fervor and humor. This honors their memory better than an idealistic, bureaucratic laundry list. (International Association of Obituarists 2001)

Miller practises this doctrine in his quarterly ezine entitled *GoodBye!* He describes his publication's editorial policy as committed to the UK's post-Massingberd model of 'laughing at the proud and including as much scandalous detail as possible'. (International Association of Obituarists 2001)

In Australia, former *Sydney Morning Herald* editor-in-chief David Bowman has argued that the best obituaries, rather than being about death, 'capture life' and are 'highly readable'. He is another advocate of the tougher, more candid appraisal:

> To get nearer the character of the person is the aim now, to delve behind the curriculum vitae and by Description and anecdote convey what the lamented - or unlamented - one was *really* like. Respect, of course, where it's due, no ungenerous tone, but no amnesty for obvious sins either, no stuffy reverence. Strengths and weaknesses it is. When the raw material is there, it comes off famously. (Bowman 1997)

Bowman points also to the new-found popularity of the genre in mainstream newspapers:

> In the English-speaking world, a newspaper of quality hardly seems complete these days without a regular obituary page…in an age when we must all pretend to be young and, if possible, beautiful and immortal, obituaries have caught on. (Bowman 1997)

Editorial Conflict

My study of Australian metropolitan newspapers has identified abundant evidence that obituaries are indeed catching on. In Melbourne, the *Age* began a dedicated obituaries columns on a dedicated page, and on a daily basis, in May 1994 (Quinn 2001). The *Sydney Morning Herald* (*SMH*) has done likewise since May 1 1996 (Hicks 2001). In Adelaide, the *Advertiser* has adopted a similar editorial strategy, though on Saturdays only, since May 1999 (Love 2001).

Before this trend emerged, all three had simply run occasional obituaries as part of the general or overseas news sections. So, newspaper readers in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide are now served - with some degree of generosity - an ordered presentation of accounts of lives as they were lived. However, the content of locally written obituaries is often better suited to the realm of hagiography:

> For all of us who have been privileged enough to have met and known Paddy, surging through the sense of loss at his passing is the reassuring knowledge that his spirit will remain as part of the landscape's identity and his family's strength. (Murphy & Sinatra 2001)

> Time and again…this same sentence was spoken: "She was such a good person." Stricken friends, workmates and admirers uttered it spontaneously as they struggled to accept the reality of…[her] sudden passing and to console each other for their loss. Other words were employed constantly too - rich, emotive and accurate words such as loving, compassionate, loyal, concerned, achieving, gentle and family-oriented. (Roach 2001)

It would be tasteless to debate the sincerity of such grief. But in considering style and practice, some questions do arise. Should readers be asked to share that measure of personal observation? Should stricter, less sentimental - and, frankly, more professional - standards be applied? There appears to be an unwillingness, on the part of our newspapers, to produce of their own volition obituaries which meet the expectations of Tim Heald in the UK, Steve Miller in the US, and David Bowman here in Australia.

Tony Love, obituaries editor at the *Advertiser*, finds there is an essential conflict between freedom of written expression and the confines of his newspaper's style:

> I have this battle of being the writer and the editor all the time. As the writer, I will quite often want to be much freer and write the way I feel it. But as a section editor, I have to sublimate that to (house) style. In the end, we try not to push for sensitive facts. You tend to shy away from them because of the sensitive nature of what we do. (Love 2001)

It must also be remembered that the Australian newspapers considered here rely heavily on locally contributed obituaries. As the contributors are, almost invariably, relatives or friends of the subject, the likelihood of critical observation is reduced accordingly. My interviews early this year with Ian Hicks, obituaries editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and Dhana Quinn, acting obituaries editor of *The Age*, support Love's experience of a publishing dilemma:

> I can't demand that people speak the absolute truth about the dear departed. All I ask is that they don't lie. (Hicks 2001)

> The *Daily Telegraph* writers wouldn't have to go back to the family and say "Are you happy with this?" But I do. (Quinn 2001)

Euphemism and a reluctance to confront reality can be found in particular in the cause of death. Publication policies vary markedly in this delicate area, in that:

- amongst syndicated obituaries reprinted in Australia, the *Daily Telegraph* sometimes reports this factor and the *New York Times* always includes it (Quinn 2001), unless old age is apparent;
- local obituaries written for the three Australian newspapers considered in my study adopt a haphazard approach. On some occasions, they specify the cause; on others, they refer to "a long illness" or "a brief illness" or ignore the point altogether.

It is here that the contrast becomes pronounced:

> The *New York Times* is almost religious about it. It's usually in the second "par" (paragraph). But [in Australia] an obituary is often contributed by a member of the family, and they don't want to [give the cause of death]. People might read it and say "He drank like a fish", but there's not a word about it. (Hicks 2001)

Years ago, as a reporter assigned to an obituary, I once faced a quandary of precisely that nature. The opening statement in the face-to-face interview, with a surviving relative, was - as I recall - this: 'He worshipped at the altar of St Agnes.' In other words, the subject of my assignment had given the brandy a fair old shake with, ultimately, fatal results.

It was a rich and eminently quotable quote but I felt constrained, for reasons of taste, not to use it. That quandary, and my exercise in self-editing, is noted sympathetically by a current practitioner of the obituary art in Australia:

> The point is, why don't we write that? Why aren't we comfortable writing that kind of truth in the way that celebrates the humanity of it rather than the tragedy of it? That's the catch. It's a question of taste, a question of manners, it's a question of whether we need to open up old wounds. (Love 2001)

In my reading of overseas obituary columns, I have found clear indications of an editorial shift towards Steve Miller's belief in learning from the dead by speaking of them freely and thinking of them objectively. This example, from the *New York Times* on Thursday May 31 this year and appearing under the by-line of Frank Litsky, illustrates the point:

> Charley Pell, who coached the University of Florida to football prominence in the 1980's but was fired amid highly publicized violations of N.C.A.A. rules, died Tuesday in Southside, Ala. He was 60. He had been suffering from lung cancer.
>
> In 1994, after he tried to asphyxiate himself, he was found to have clinical depression. As Randy Rees, a business associate and former women's swimming coach at Florida, observed: "Coaching was his life. He had found the one thing he loved to do, and he wasn't able to do it anymore, and that was very difficult for him to deal with." (Litsky 2001:B9)

And, from the *Weekly Telegraph* (UK), there was this graphic account of the suffering endured by John Diamond, a journalist and broadcaster who had died of cancer:

> The cancer emerged in his tongue, and the removal of a large section of this under surgery left a master of the quick riposte incapable, even with the aid of a plastic valve, of emitting much more than a series of honks and clicks. (*Weekly Telegraph* 2001)

There are signs too that reticence is no longer practised in instances of AIDS-related death:

> It's OK now to identify AIDS or AIDS-related [as the cause of death]. But you can't say how it was contracted. People have suspicious natures and if somebody under the age of 50 dies, and they had connections with the theatre, then it's often assumed they died of AIDS. (Heald 2001)

Even though it is, strictly speaking, not possible to defame the dead, obituaries do at times shy away from recounting the literal reality. Understatement is sometimes employed, with loaded messages conveyed in arcane 'obit-speak' - to the delight of the *cognoscenti*:

> A notorious crook, for instance, might have to be judged "not to have upheld the highest ethical standards of the City". (Massingberd 1996:ix)

In its tribute to the flamboyant pianist Liberace, the *Daily Telegraph* noted that he successfully sued a British newspaper which had implied he was homosexual. It then referred briefly to a 'palimony' suit brought by his former chauffeur, Scott Thorson, and concluded Liberace's obituary with this telling sentence:

> He was unmarried. (Massingberd 1998:7)

There is some unwillingness, however, on the part of Australian newspapers to produce of their own volition obituaries which play this sort of game. Though they do include colourful anecdotes at times, the tenor is generally more prosaic than that found in their British and American counterparts.

Teaching the Obituary Art

My interest in the obituary as a form of literary journalism has been nurtured by my university teaching experiences. I have found that the obituary can offer an eminently satisfying experience for the writer, the student, and the teacher of creative nonfiction. At its best, it demands elegance of expression and discipline of purpose, a gift for relating anecdote and a rigorous checking of fact, a sense of history and poetry, and a style of writing which should be at once engaging and authoritative.

I have taught it, as an element of an offshore MA program, for the past five years. Before that, I taught it within a final-year journalism undergraduate award for four years. In each instance, I had to bridge some significant cultural gaps - created by the erratic standard of obituary writing as it is practised in Australia. As this paper demonstrates, our obituary columns offer a strange synthesis of the parochial and the global. Syndicated pieces, from specialist writers in Britain and the United States, appear alongside homespun obituaries submitted for publication by surviving family members or friends. Both realism and euphemism punctuate this uneasy discourse. The reader is confronted by passages of vigorous illumination and by slabs of plodding recitation.

It is questionable too whether Australian readers of any demographic Description - not just students - are necessarily familiar with the identities whose lives are recounted in well crafted, yet at times esoteric, syndicated pieces. Perhaps it is the imprimatur of the *Daily Telegraph* or the *New York Times* which attracts obituary editors and persuades them to fill their pages with accounts of remote lives.

The *SMH*, for example, within the first week of December 2000 ran the obituaries of:

- Gordon Rich (described as 'Irreverent banker') - from *The New York Times*;
- Rayner Unwin ('Publisher') - from *The Guardian*;
- Harry Oster ('Folklorist') - from *The Guardian*;
- Andy Logan ('City hall reporter') - from *The New York Times*.

Filling five 56cm broadsheet columns six days a week is undeniably a challenge, but it does seem appropriate to query the relevance of such life studies. Opportunities for the teacher of the craft, particularly in identifying relevant and readable published examples, are further compromised by inadequacies of technique in the local product. Australian newspapers are seldom willing to commission a specialist writer to the task.

The effect of such shortcomings is unfortunate, for I have noted that students of creative writing have the potential to develop a measure of enthusiasm for the obituary art once they are exposed to the best examples from contemporary journalism. This process of exposure is important, for the obituary requires that writers:

- **research** with diligence - to discover details of history (especially those involving theatres of war) about which primary sources are often unreliable;
- **interview** with persistence - seeking anecdotes to enliven the text;
- **report** with accuracy - for bereaved families do not want to be further distressed by the publication, in perpetuity, of errors;
- **deliver** the product with felicity - so that, on the page, the dead are restored to life.

The harnessing of these virtues is a considerable test for the novice writer. It offers some considerable rewards too. Students assigned to obituary composition, I have noted, learn much about the self-control demanded by professional writing in this genre, about the critical expectations of a discerning adult readership, and about the hidden riches of apparently ordinary lives. They are amazed to discover, through their own enquiry, that great-grandpa rode his bike from Adelaide to Canberra to seek work during the Depression and that great-grandma used to drive a bullock team in the Mallee.

It is disappointing, therefore, to find that - despite the revival of the obituary's presence in Australian newspapers - the mainstream media standard is so often poor. There are far too many examples of wooden narrative, tedious chronological recitation, and sanctimonious expression. There is blandness and reverence where there should be vigour and pragmatism.

Questions of Style

The *SMH*, the *Age*, and the *Advertiser* offer some marked differences (and some occasional idiosyncrasies) in technicalities of style within their obituaries, as too do the overseas services whose syndicated material they use. The differences are apparent at first sight.

The *Age* prints obituaries on the 'Life & Times' page of its 'Today' section. This positioning, especially when considered against that applied by the *SMH*, does confer a certain lightness of touch and relaxation of manner. Melbourne's morning broadsheet begins the main obituary of the day with what is known in the trade as a 'stand-first', highlighting the subject's name, identity, dates of birth and death, and (in bold type) an acknowledgment of life achievements. Here is a typical treatment:

> Jack O'Leary
> Comedian
> 3.5.1930 - 24.1.2001

> A stand-up comic of the old school, he was also an actor, singer, businessman, family man and tireless worker for many charities. (Callan 2001)

This tactic enables the *Age* to start the text of many of its obituaries with an introductory paragraph (known in journalism as the 'intro') in a creative style of writing - a 'teaser' to entice the reader. Such an approach can be found in this obituary of a snake-handler:

> He was said to have been bitten more than 10 times by deadly snakes; one bite from a brown snake sent him into unconsciousness before a friend called an ambulance. But George Cann, "the Snake Man of La Perouse", survived the perils, long enough at least, to die on January 15 at the respectable age of 73 and of natural causes. (Brown 2001)

Informality is condoned, even encouraged, to the extent that given names alone are often used in referring to subjects. With its reliance on contributed obituaries, frequently by amateur writers in their capacity as readers, the *Age* ignores newspaper convention and often adopts a style found more commonly in school magazines and parish newsletters. Take, as a demonstration of its capacity for editorial nonconformity, the 78 column centimetres devoted on November 28 last year to Bessie Smith. The obituary, or rather the folksy eulogy, was written by her grandson and referred to its subject by a pet diminutive:

> …I have felt proud and honoured to share a long relationship with the remarkable woman I have always known as "Nana". I cannot believe that I will never see her again…Nana's world was a magical world filled with quiet and simple pleasures of life… Whenever I sit down for a cup of tea, Nana will be with me in my heart, and when next I climb a tree to rescue an injured bird, Nana will be holding the ladder. (Smith 2000)

Within a few days of the Bessie Smith obituary, the *Age* obituaries page led with a tribute to the soprano Rhonda Bruce. It was written by her husband, yet its style was rigidly formal, consistently using her surname alone:

> Bruce was born in Bendigo…Bruce sang the sacred solo…Bruce spent two seasons with the English touring company Opera For All … (Hutchinson-Brooks 2000)

The Bessie Smith and Rhonda Bruce obituaries, it should be noted, were both written by close family members, yet applied marked contrasts in style in referring to their subjects. The 'surname only' treatment is applied as a matter of course by the *SMH*. The obituaries editor, Ian Hicks, told me in February this year that he believes in 'a form of equality' and regards *Age* style as 'a little too close [intimate] at times' (Hicks 2001). So it is that Bishop Barry Collins, for many years director of religious education in the Catholic archdiocese of Sydney, became simply 'Collins' in the *SMH* obituary columns:

> Collins was ordained in 1961… Following studies at Boston College, Collins was appointed director of religious education… In 1994 Collins was appointed bishop to the diocese of Wilcannia-Forbes. (Canavan 2000)

This more staid approach, when compared with that of *The Age*, can be attributed to the editor's own professional persuasion and to the placement, within the newspaper as a whole, of the obituaries (Quinn 2001). Unlike the 'Life & Times' spot enjoyed by obituaries in the *Age*, the *SMH's* generally appear within the 'Business' section.

Students of the obituary craft therefore find themselves confronted by some marked differences in style, not only between Australia's daily newspapers but - certainly as far as the *Age* is concerned - within the one newspaper.

Cutting Through the Social Divide

Apart from their willingness to publish unalloyed fact, newspapers of record in the US and the UK have widened the obituary catchment zone. Until recent times, their obituary columns were the province of bishops, generals, sport and entertainment identities, political leaders and ambassadors. A social revolution, notably in British editorial management, is changing all that. Obituaries are now being written on characters who have undermined society rather than adorned it.

Once more, it is Hugh Massingberd, in his capacity as obituaries editor of the *Daily Telegraph*, who is seen as having led this change:

> Pre-Massingberd, people like the Krays wouldn't have got a run in obits. (Heald 2001)

The *Telegraph* obituaries page, in its egalitarian way, acknowledged the life of Ronnie Kray by noting that - with his twin brother Reggie - he had 'formed one of the most notorious criminal partnerships of modern times' (Massingberd 1999:280). The brothers' 20-year career of violence and standover tactics was then detailed for *Telegraph* readers.

Apparently those readers have appreciated the shift in editorial policy, for obituaries have been republished in book form. There are six volumes in the set. When the *Telegraph* brought out the fourth anthology in this series of collected obituaries, the volume was simply sub-titled Rogues. It recounted 98 lives, including requiems for a trio of heavyweights - Mafia bosses Anthony 'Fat Man' Salerno and Vincent 'Big Vinnie' Teresa, along with Queensland's Russ Hinze.

This relaxation of social convention has brought with it a capacity for plain-speaking on the part of the writer. Such candour is typified within the *Times* obituary (printed by the *Australian*) of Linda McCartney:

> Despite the intensity of her relationship with one of Britain's best loved pop stars…she never won the hearts of her husband's fans. Short on glamour, divorced, a single parent and an American, she was to many a less attractive catch than McCartney's previous girlfriend, English actor Jane Asher… [Linda] was derided for a lack of musical talent and an ugly singing voice. (*Australian* 1998:15)

Where candour works best of all in the obituary, however, is in recounting the oddities and eccentricities of humankind. It has given us such literary riches as these:

> Ian Board…was the proprietor of the Colony Room, a Soho drinking club favoured by Bohemians, artists, homosexuals and assorted loafers. Perched on a stool by the door, clad in tasteless leisure-wear…[he] would trade coarse badinage with his regulars. (Massingberd 1996:333)

> Denisa, Lady Newborough, who has died aged 79, was many things: wire-walker, nightclub girl, nude dancer, air pilot. Her admirers included the Kings of Spain and Bulgaria, Adolf Hitler…Benito Mussolini…and Sheikh ben Ghana, who gave her 500 sheep. (Massingberd 1996:23)

And then there was the remarkable Jeffrey Bernard, London columnist and layabout who was sacked by *Sporting Life* for what the editor described as an 'unpardonable exhibition at a point-to-point dinner'. (*Electronic Telegraph* 1997)

Bernard, whose exploits were celebrated in the play *Jeffrey Bernard Is Unwell*, was determined to avoid any posthumous bowdlerising. He therefore wrote his own obituary, confessing his alcoholism, his inability to remain faithful to any of his four wives, and his chronic unsuitability for employment.

The *Telegraph*, true to its abomination of euphemism, ran his every word.

Burying the Posthumous Parallax

I have found myself influenced by my own rhetoric. As a writer, a former newspaper reporter, and teacher in the genre, I had set out on my study of obituaries with a certain sympathy for the circumspect approach. The evidence I have gathered, through my reading and my interviews, effectively undermines that attitude. I believe that I was locked in a pre-Massingberd warp. It is clear to me now that obituaries can be enriched by plain-speaking.

In reconsidering the art, I am reminded in particular of the sentiment expressed by one of my prime sources, *Advertiser* obituaries editor Tony Love: that the writer should pursue the 'kind of truth…that celebrates the humanity of [a life] rather than the tragedy of it' (Love 2001).

GoodBye! editor Steve Miller jogs me into a changed awareness too:

> Why are we burying the dead with only the government's favorite facts as a record? The dead have so many more tales to tell than this. (International Association of Obituarists 2001)

I therefore maintain that it is now acceptable to demonstrate to students of creative nonfiction that obituaries can chronicle 'what people were really like through informed anecdote, Description and character sketch rather than merely trot out the bald *curriculum vitae*' (Massingberd 1996:viii). I trust that those students, as potential contributors to Australian newspapers' obituary pages, will come to write with more power and more bite than one encounters in our domestic product at present.

Naturally, there are some matters of taste which warrant the professional writer's acknowledgment and tacit self-censorship. There is something weak, unseemly, about indulging in a vicious posthumous exposé. In the general exercise of the obituary, however, I find that the parallax view offers a distortion which is itself ripe for burial.

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