

三蘇：瞻仰遺容乃虐待弔客兼侮辱死者之行爲論

Paying One's Last Respects is Both a Source of Anguish for the Living and an Insult to the Dead

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Translated by Don J. Cohn

EVERYONE who has attended a memorial service in a funeral parlour knows about the rigmarole you have to go through before the casket is finally sealed. This little ritual is referred to as "paying one's last respects" and begins when the master of ceremonies announces: "And now it's time to take a last look at our dearly departed Mr X." I find this total nonsense. I've been attending funerals for years and have a good understanding of the kind of mood people are in when they take part in this ritual; the truth is, very few people enjoy it.

I wonder when people first started "paying their last respects" and what genius invented this ritual. In the past, traditional etiquette prescribed that only the immediate family could observe the ritual of placing a precious stone in the mouth of the deceased, and naturally friends were excluded. Once the precious stone was in place, the coffin was sealed, never to be opened again. In the old days, if friends or relatives wanted a final look at the deceased's body, they would do so before the corpse was placed in the coffin, after which the person's death was considered a *fait accompli*, and his remains would never again see the light of day. Compared to this today's funerals are pure farce. The corpse, already in the coffin, is put on display in the centre of the funeral hall and the guests are forced to parade before it as if they were "observing a precious stone being placed in the deceased's mouth"; all of which is disguised by the euphemism "paying one's last respects". This bit of invention has to be one of the great absurdities of our age.

If you sincerely cherish someone's memory, you will likely retain a mental image of that person's appearance when he or she was alive and well. What good is it to leave mourners with a post-mortem image as a final memory? Even though the corpse may have been prettified by a mortuary cosmetician, can you really improve a dead person's looks? Neither science nor art can restore the bloom of

youth to a great beauty who is no longer among the living. I venture to suggest that the dead would certainly prefer their survivors to remember them at their most attractive, rather than have people carry around an image of them lying in their coffins. This is particularly true if death was caused by an accident or followed an extended illness, in which case the corpse would certainly be an appalling sight. Why must a public spectacle be made of such a repulsive thing? I suspect that the inventor of the ritual called "paying one's last respects" was some sort of sadist.

Some people might say that the ritual is a foreign concept, an emulation of the way great men, such as Gandhi or John F. Kennedy, lay in state. Thousands of people were willing to wait in line for the privilege of filing past these men's remains, and many even reached out to touch their coffins and broke down in tears. This explains the origins of the grand spectacle called "paying one's last respects"; it was only meant for great men in the first place. In fact, there are even a few great men who *still* haven't been buried, their corpses having been embalmed for posterity to gaze upon respectfully. But does the average person deserve such treatment?

To my way of thinking, putting the remains of a dead person on display at a funeral and forcing everyone present to file past them is really a kind of torture. (Mourners are a captive audience, so it's hard *not* to look, since there's always someone there to get people in line and make you take your turn.) The guests who have come to mourn can get a final look at the deceased from a photograph hung up in the funeral hall, which should serve as a sufficient reminder. Why must the friends and relatives of the deceased come away from the funeral with a horrifying impression of the dearly departed which may keep them up all night? Certainly this is a kind of torture.

From the deceased's point of view, death is *the* end, and since few mourners will bear the deceased any private grievances, it seems unnecessary to wheel him or her out and put them on display. (Of course if the deceased had offended someone, it's unlikely that person would show up at a funeral ceremony.) There's an old saying: "Let the dead rest in peace." Once the body is lying in the coffin, is the purpose of displaying it with the lid open to have the mourners certify the deceased's identity, or to have the deceased's relatives attest that they got the right corpse? And does everybody have to be there to bear witness? Also, when the master of ceremonies cries out: "Seal the coffin!" isn't he really saying: "OK everybody, if you all agree we've got the right stiff here, let's go out and bury him"? Could there be anything more insulting to the dead? No matter how you look at it, "paying one's last respects" is both a source of anguish for the living and an insult to the dead. It simply makes no sense.