

0 Words, Where Are Thy Sting?

by [Jeff Plude](#) (April 2019)

Where I live, the dead are usually buried once the snow and ice give way to the rough winds that shake the darling buds of May. Over the past four years, I've had to stand in windswept cemeteries and behind funeral home lecterns and try to speak comforting words on behalf of the half-dozen loved ones who had died, or for the survivors I should say, as they're grimly but aptly called. Because dead men (and women) not only don't tell tales, they don't hear any either. But their families do, and while a eulogy often consoles, in some cases it can inflame.

It's long been said and understood that we're not to speak ill of the dead. Perhaps the idea is that you don't kick somebody when they're down, and especially if there's no chance whatsoever of their ever getting back up (at least in this life). And they are no longer here to defend themselves. So it's been passed down in the form of an unofficial universal law: *De mortuis, nihil nisi bonum*—of the dead, nothing but good. Antony professed in his shrewd funeral oration, “I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him. / The evil that men do lives after them / The good is oft interred with their bones / So let it be with Caesar,” but then went on to do just that, to praise him (and bash the “honorable” Brutus and his co-conspirators), although with self-serving motives.

But sometimes the oppressed cry out for the last word against the not-so-dearly departed. Think of dictators. What good to say of them? Surely they're in Hell, for those of us who believe in divine retribution for the unrepentant and unredeemed, and nothing anyone can say post mortem can punish them, let alone undo the horrors they wreaked. But it's easy to feel this way, to want revenge even if it's with mere words. And if you can't quite work up a decent amount of disgust for some faraway monster in place or time who didn't do anything to you or yours, there are an endless stream of local petty tyrants that haunt us—the ones in power wherever you live who may have done you or your family or friends harm, perhaps even great evil.

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Political eulogies are a different matter by definition—they're political, not personal. I think of Pericles consoling the families who lost their soldier husbands and sons and fathers and brothers during the Peloponnesian War, meant as much to inspire the citizens with patriotism as to quell the grief of the survivors. And there's the Gettysburg Address, all of 271 words, which took Lincoln only a few minutes to deliver—a double blessing, since it was not only more powerful because it was concise, but it followed a two-hour speech. I've already mentioned Antony. And in our era, there's Senator Robert Kennedy's eulogy for Martin Luther King Jr., given extemporaneously on a flatbed truck while he was campaigning for president in 1968, in a black neighborhood in Indianapolis at night, after King was gunned down only a

few hours before by a white man. After breaking the news to the crowd about their beloved fallen leader, he refers to his own brother's death not quite five years before, the young dashing president whose face was blown off in a motorcade, also killed by a white man (or two). At the climax of the speech he recites a passage from Aeschylus, whom he called his favorite poet: "In our sleep pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God." That sounds a bit pretentious to me, and not quite true. Sometimes those drops come in a torrent. But still, they were brave, poignant, calming words under circumstances that could've turned deadly fast.

But occasionally such eulogies—"good words" in Greek—don't follow the sacred dictum, and what we hear or read is nothing but bad. More recently, there's Hunter Thompson's diatribe on Richard Nixon. But for me the most notorious and dastardly of all was delivered—detonated is more like it—nearly a century ago by that verbal bomb thrower in Baltimore, H.L. Mencken.

Mencken's target was William Jennings Bryan, who had died unexpectedly just five days after his disastrous appearance in the infamous Scopes trial, in which a substitute high school teacher was convicted of violating a state law that prohibited the teaching of the theory of evolution. Bryan, serving on the prosecution's team, was portrayed as the biggest ape of all in the so-called Monkey Trial, the trial of the century (perhaps, given the subject matter, even the millennium).

But in the end I think Mencken out-simianed Bryan by a country mile. In his written eulogy, Mencken was more like a chimpanzee who'd stuck his long fingers in the jar to grab a

banana and couldn't get it back out because he wouldn't let go of it and was now hopping and screeching and chattering his fool head off.

Mencken seems to have written at least two eulogies—perhaps we should call them malogies—of Bryan. [He wrote one for the evening paper of *The Baltimore Sun*](#) (which I'll be referring to), where he was a longtime star columnist. Another version appeared in *The American Mercury*, a literary magazine he cofounded that, after he left, apparently became anti-Semitic.

Bryan's great crimes, unforgivable sins, in Mencken's jaundiced eyes were mainly two: he opposed the theory of evolution, in other words he believed the Bible was the literal word of God and that Genesis was the true account of how the world was created (though he believed in an "Old Earth," i.e. that a "day" in holy scripture could be thousands of years or even longer, which is contrary to true evangelical Christianity); and he was close to the common people, like the ones outside the courthouse and in the hill country around Dayton, Tennessee, who disgusted the all-knowing city columnist like so many vermin.

Mencken has a monomaniacal contempt for these people, whom he mocks like a schoolyard bully, taunting them over and over for the benefit of the city-slickers back in the rarefied cosmopolitan milieu of Baltimore: "yokels," "forlorn mob," "rustic ignoramuses," "poor clods," and best of all, "canaille" (which is derived from canine). As if these people who don't agree with the city-slicker cynic and his gang of intellectual thugs don't have the right to exist let alone believe anything, especially "a childish theology," as he calls it. Though many great thinkers and artists—Pascal,

Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy—have also believed it, in their own ways, which Mencken certainly knew.

Speaking of Tolstoy, he and Bryan admired each other. When Bryan took a European tour in 1903, he delayed meeting with Czar Nicholas II because Tolstoy had invited him to Yasnaya Polyana, his estate. [Bryan stayed with Tolstoy for a long day](#) and discussed, among other topics, non-resistance to evil. Tolstoy reportedly found him “a thoughtful serious man.” (Interestingly Darrow, who headed up the defense for evolution, the real defendant, also admired Tolstoy and wrote a book called, *Resist Not Evil*.)

It's a full-blown classic case of journalist's envy—to be the lesser light reporting on the luminaries. Always on the sidelines, never in the game. Mencken fumes:

His career brought him into contact with the first men of his time . . . It was hard to believe, watching him at Dayton, that he had traveled, that he had been received in civilized societies, that he had been a high officer of state . . . He was a peasant come home to the dung-pile. Imagine a gentleman, and you have imagined everything that he was not.

But we don't have to imagine about Mencken himself: It's clear from that rant that the author is definitely not a gentleman. As far as dung piles go, he seems to have had his bloated head stuck in one just before he picked up his crude pen.

He wastes no time in smearing Bryan as having a “manginess about his appearance; he somehow seemed dirty,” but in the same breath admitting that he was “carefully shaved, and clad in immaculate linen.” Bryan was also “sweating horribly and pumping his palm-leaf fan.” It’s July 1925 in the American South. They were in a courtroom before air-conditioning had become one of the unalienable rights of the materialist constitution. Bryan was not a small man. City people apparently sweated elegantly. Hicks sweat horribly, especially big Hicks. Not even Bryan’s pate and ears escape the columnist’s fastidious censure: “All the hair was gone from the dome of his head, and it had begun to fall out, too, behind his ears . . . ” Jesus told his followers that you can’t make one hair on your head white or black (without dye), and you can’t keep it from falling out either. But no matter. Mencken holds Bryan accountable for every idle hair he sheds.

If you think Mencken is just mugging for the wags back home, there doesn’t appear to be a hint of irony in this screed. He says it all with a straight-faced, petty malice.

After a snapshot of the brute, Mencken turns up the volume. The old resonant voice of countless campaign trails and chautauquas isn’t what it used to be (Bryan is sixty-five, Mencken forty-five at the time). But it’s not just the “reedy” tone of it: “Who knows that, like Demosthenes, he had a lisp? In his prime, under the magic of his eloquence, no one noticed it. But when he spoke at Dayton it was always audible.”

Apparently Mencken was unaware that Demosthenes didn’t lisp but stuttered. At least according to Plutarch’s detailed description:

He had, it seems, a weakness in his voice, a perplexed and indistinct utterance and a shortness of breath, which, by breaking and disjointing his sentences, much obscured the sense and meaning of what he spoke.

It certainly sounds like stuttering to me. (And I ought to know, since I stuttered myself for a good part of my life.) A lisp is easy enough to tell from a stutter. I suspect it's highly unlikely if not impossible for people in their sixties to suddenly develop a lisp. Perhaps Mencken had something else in mind, like an attack on Bryan's masculinity.

This feverish tongue-lashing would be almost comical if it weren't so clumsy. The so-called "Bad Boy of Baltimore" seems to have never quite grown up. (He didn't get married until he was nearly fifty, and had to do a *mea maxima culpa* since he'd often lampooned the notion of two becoming one flesh.) He can't even bring himself to actually say that Bryan was once secretary of state and a congressman. He's merely "a high officer of state."

Then with the nonchalance of a psychopath contemplating his victim:

But what of his life? Did he accomplish any useful thing? Was he, in his day, of any dignity as a man, and of any value to his fellow-men? I doubt it. Bryan, at his best, was simply a magnificent job-seeker. The issues that he bawled about usually meant nothing to him. He was ready to abandon them whenever he could make votes by doing so . .

Let's do a brief fact-check of this denunciation *ex cathedra*.

Bryan ran for president three times and lost each time. His big issue was getting rid of the gold standard and replacing it with silver. (It never caught on, but the gold standard was eventually done away with in 1971.) He indeed flip-flopped on Prohibition, but was a teetotaler himself—another mortal sin according to the Gospel of Mencken. Undoubtedly he was one of the most influential figures during the era of reform from the 1890s to the early 1920s. He ardently opposed American imperialism, and strongly criticized the U.S. annexation of the Philippines as a result of the Spanish-American War. He also was a committed antiwar advocate. He resigned his post as secretary of state after a German U-boat sank the British ocean liner Lusitania killing over a hundred Americans and prompting President Wilson to send a strong warning to Germany, which was in the middle of the First World War and which Bryan didn't want the U.S. to be drawn into.

Whether Bryan was wrong or not, it was a principled stand, debunking the fake news that he was nothing more than a “magnificent job-seeker” and that the causes he “bawled” about meant nothing to him. But Mencken says Bryan was ambitious, something opportunistic newspaper hacks never are.

Mencken also reenacts Bryan's downfall during the trial. He ascribes it to evangelical Christianity, which “as everyone knows, is founded upon hate, as the Christianity of Christ was founded upon love.” This is right out of the modern media

playbook, that Jesus is all love all the time and tells us to judge not, lest we be judged (instead of what he actually says, in context, which is not to judge hypocritically). Now Mencken reveals his real enemy—the Christian Philistines and their Goliath—and rebukes them. To make it worse, we can at least be sure that Mencken, unlike today's Bible bashers, had read it and knew exactly what it says, in context, but lied about it anyway.

The great scourge of evolution's enemies brandishes the word "hatred" five times in describing Bryan at the trial. But it's Mencken's own pathological hatred that's palpable. Standing on a table in the courtroom looking down on Bryan (appropriately), like a man-boy who'd sneaked past the bailiff, he's transfixed by the eyes of the great commoner-ogre. "They were blazing points of hatred. They glittered like occult and sinister gems," Mencken says breathlessly, like a child describing the boogeyman in a nightmare. It's too bad Mencken never wrote for the pulps, with fine sensibilities like that.

Now that he has dispatched the champion of Christendom, he turns on Bryan's wife like a gloating barbarian. After Dudley Field Malone's "terrific philippic" for evolution, and after his wife, "young and in the full flush of beauty," is "stormed" with congratulations on the brilliance of her husband, Mencken's feral eyes turn to Mrs. Bryan. Without any well-wishers, she's "hunched in her chair near the judge." With the mock concern of an ambulance chaser, Mencken says he thinks she saw in her husband's eyes with "some appalling prescience" that his collapse was near on the witness stand, testifying as a supposed expert for the Bible (which Mencken was not there for). Then he strips off her last covering of dignity: "I thought then that she was ill—she has been making

the round of sanitariums for years, and was lately in the hands of a faith-healer . . . ”

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Ironically, Mencken himself seems to have had lifelong bouts of depression. I wouldn't wonder. "What was behind that consuming hatred?" he asks rhetorically about Bryan. We might ask the same question about Mencken.

In this redirecting of self-loathing, Mencken mimics the wannabe *Übermensch* who seems to be his chief spiritual influence. Mencken wrote a couple of books about his guru, *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche* and *The Gist of Nietzsche*, and even translated *The Antichrist*. That such thinking lead to the Third Reich is not surprising, I think, though the Teutonic hermit's apologizers deny it. Nietzsche embodied everything that Bryan hated about evolution, and what it inevitably bred.

Nietzsche, somewhat like his acolyte from Baltimore, was also spurned for the most part by romantic love, which he seemed to clamor for and which he also channeled through his overinflated ego. Instead he wound up with his arms around the neck of a nag in the streets of Turin and was out of his wits until his death a dozen years later.

Mencken's decline wasn't nearly as dramatic. In his twilight years he apparently liked to scrounge in the back alleys of Baltimore, near the home he shared with his brother, for scrap firewood. Imagine what he would've made of this little morsel if it were Bryan! The poor old clod right where he belonged—in civilization's gutter! The Goliath of garbage-pickers trying to cover up the pit of truth from his empty forehead!

He was sometimes joined in this eccentric ritual by a friend and protégé, William Manchester, who was a young reporter at *The Sun* when Mencken's own sun was well past its zenith (and who was also the first to write a book about the assassination of John F. Kennedy, but was sued by the president's widow and brother Bobby even though they'd authorized him to write the book). Manchester described it in the second edition of his biography of Mencken, called *Disturber of the Peace*. I ran across it in *The Book of Eulogies*, edited and with commentary by Phyllis Theroux.

Mr. Manchester said the last time he saw him, shortly before Mencken died, he "struck a pose" in the vestibule—one hand on a railing and the other on his hip. "Heaven is prepared for me now," Mencken proclaimed, according to Mr. Manchester. "Very soon, I'll be there. Won't it be exquisite?"

Was there a punch line? But no. Surely Mencken's "heaven" can't be the same one as believed in by the "cad undiluted," that "old Berserker Bryan"? The same one as the man who, like many others before and after him, firmly held a reasonable belief contrary to the one that Mencken and his cronies believed, which a century and a half after its conception is still a scientific theory and nothing more?

Meanwhile Bryan was buried in Arlington National Cemetery. [His epitaph](#): “Statesman. Yet Friend To Truth! Of Soul Sincere. In Action Faithful. And In Honor Clear.” (I like the “Yet.”) And on the back of the stone along the bottom: “He kept the faith.”

And so he did, much to Mencken’s eternal and futile rage. And what about Nietzsche’s disciple? 0 words, where are thy sting now?

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