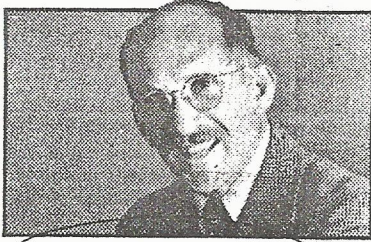


Behind the lines



By George H. Gurley Jr.

Swanay: just killer JAN 10 1985 AM in the end

He wore the beret, the beard and the mustache of an artist. He was a gourmet chef, a scholar and a teacher. Friends described him as a mercurial genius. But when his body lay in an alley last weekend, John Swanay was nothing more than a murderer.

We think of most murderers as victims themselves, shaped in the lower depths of society. We explain, and even try to justify, their violence as the result of poverty and ignorance. Some murders are whims of convenience store robbers. Some are the acted-out hallucinations of war veterans who are pursued by demons or who have decided that "society's had its chance."

John Swanay was different. He came from the world of the university, of carriage house parties, refined palates and witty discourse. Of connoisseurs, worshipers of style — an aristocracy that sometimes looks down on the culture of the masses with contempt and distaste.

Murderers with John Swanay's pedigree are rare. Lovers of art aren't supposed to be violent. And yet, in his final hour he crossed the boundary from civilization to barbarism and chaos. He became a full member of the fraternity of murderers, no different from all the other ignorant, brutal killers who roam the streets and fill the jails.

Why is it then that his crossing-over disturbs us more? Is it because we have been told he was a genius? Is it because we are more moved by the tragic loss of potential, the myth of the hero destroyed by the grandeur of his aspirations, than by the loss of his victims?

It seems that we're beguiled by this myth of genius. No label is used more glibly. (Bill Walsh, coach of the San Francisco 49ers, is "a genius.") We covet intelligence more than wealth. Who doesn't fantasize a ge-

nus buried inside himself? Everyone's impressed by a high IQ. And who doesn't dread being thought of as dull?

In the movie "Amadeus" the composer Antonio Salieri sees Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's sublime, perfect manuscripts and realizes they are first drafts. It seems as if Mozart has simply taken dictation from God. And Salieri is consumed with bitter envy that God has chosen as his mouthpiece not a devoted servant, but a vulgar lout.

But who hasn't been tempted by the dream of creating something beautiful and imperishable that would justify his life? Who isn't subject to delusions of grandeur? Ironically, the love of music, the desire to glorify God through art, leads Salieri to an insane jealousy and an attempt to murder Mozart.

Why are we so in love with genius? Most geniuses are unhappy. Many of them have been scoundrels. The world is full of geniuses, people with superior intelligence who can't put it together. Genius without common sense and the ability to get along with people is worthless. And yet we pay homage to genius and have little esteem for goodness, sanity and hard work.

Some ignorant men become wise with age. Some brilliant men go mad. Some find a kind of peace in failure. Some grasp tenure and lose themselves. Some are so inflated by slight achievements that their feet don't touch the ground. And there are a few giants like Leonardo who on their deathbeds ask, "Was anything done?" Genius is no sure exit from the maze, no formula for success or happiness.

Did John Swanay think he was a genius? Or was he, like Salieri, in despair because he could appreciate genius and knew he wasn't one? We're told he was a perfectionist. Was he deluded into thinking that his restaurant was on the scale of a Mozart symphony, so perfect that not a single note — a tissue in the wastebasket, an antique settee on the porch — could be introduced without destroying that perfection?

What a liar the ego is, what an architect of castles in the air. John Swanay wasn't a genius or a great man. In the end he was a petty tyrant who thought his little kingdom was the center of the universe. He was a perfectionist over trivialities. Yet some took his tantrums for the birth throes of inspiration.

People say he "snapped," but lots of people under pressure snap without committing murder. The wonder is that he made it almost to the age of 60 without revealing his potential for this kind of violence. Obsessed with control of his kingdom, his final gesture was to try to kill everyone in it.