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Chronicles of Culture
defiance of government stricutures was an unalloyed attack on the Nixon Administration which "could not be allowed to win or draw in the war." Two years later, the New York Times got what it wanted.

The triumph of the Times made it the Fourth Estate, a coequal member of government that was not accountable to anyone but its own officials. So powerful did its voice become that influential government officials did its bidding, including those who testified that the paper did not violate national secrets with its unauthorized release of the Pentagon Papers. While this view was challenged by military experts and later borne out with the tactics deployed by the North Vietnamese army in its final assault on the south (the tactics were in fact suggested in the Pentagon Papers), the tide of public opinion had shifted to the side of the Times. Many Americans were by now convinced that the military officials could not tell the truth.

Only one victory was yet to be won: the ousting of President Nixon. Although the leadership in this campaign was seized by the Washington Post, the Times was not to be outdone. The Times, not known for balanced reporting, entered into a game of one-upmanship with the Post for public attention and approbation. Nixon had acted unwisely, perhaps foolishly, but in the vise created by the Times and the Post, he was considered a threat to the continuation of the Republic. Joseph Kraft wrote, "There was a systematic effort to set up what amounts to a police state." Nothing, of course, was further from the truth. Nixon, a somewhat insecure man, was on the defensive from the outset, "placed in the bullseye of the media," as Braley puts it, and was unable to dodge the vicious, unrelenting darts that were thrown at him. That there was an inexcusability to the Vietnam War-the Pentagon Papers-North Vietnamese victory-Watergate is made patently clear in Bad News.

By the mid-1970's the Times was urging the American people to reattach itself to the comfortable but specious position of isolationism. How could most people know this view was wrong-headed? The Times has the largest, if not the best, staff of foreign correspondents in the world. Those who are good reporters—and there are many—often become captives of the Times ideology. In the Washington bureau and the home office, John Oakes, James Reston, Tom Wicker, and Anthony Lewis hold the keys to advancement. Herbert Matthews, David Halberstam, Seymour Hersh, and Harrison Salisbury won Pulitzer Prizes and serve as the models of success. Before them it was Walter Duranty, an avowed apologist for Stalinist crimes who reported the Potemkin Villages as the new Eden, who ruled the empire on 43rd Street in Manhattan.

One cannot survive in public life and take on the paper. It is too big, influential, and close to the levers of power. The Times has developed a world view that suggests that people in the developing world and revolutionaries everywhere must be placated, mollified, solicited, and appeased so they won't challenge the privilege, authority, and power the paper has arrogated to itself. If the prestige of this nation is lost in the process, that is only a small price to pay for the survival and apotheosis of the Times.

Bad News makes it apparent that our nation has been routinely undermined in the pursuit of its foreign policy by media representatives who stand above the law, beyond the reach of the electorate, and on top of a self-created altar of perceived wisdom. This book may not be widely read, as it will undoubtedly receive little media exposure. It probably won't win any awards. How can it when the Book Critics Circle and the National Book Award Committee are in alliance with the extended New York Times family?

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Remembrance of Trivia Past


by Gordon M. Pradi

Surely the most significant text a man ever starts out to interpret is the compromise that is his own life. The events, rugged and serene, that tempt explanation were shared by others, and so it is with delicacy and humility that the autobiographer should seek to set the record straight—yet all too frequently the public demand urges on the writer some version of whitewash. Consequently, the best that one can expect to find in an autobiography are glimpses of complexity, the occasional lowering of the self-serving hand. Because of the contradictions inherent in interpreting one's own life, autobiography tends to be the more conservative of literary mediums. In part this results from the retrospective valuing that such thinking and telling requires, for a value scheme as it relates to the actions of a life, especially one usually past its summit, seeks generally for dogmatic closure, for a kind of ultimate vindication of opportunities squandered, roads not taken. Inevitably one will remember things that at last can be presented in the best of all possible colorations, and better to have one final say before the dust settles. What, then, can a reader learn from postured documentation? At its best, something about the quality of social living. Moreover, an autobiography should provide inspiration and guidance for subsequent generations.

William Phillips, cofounder and longtime editor of the Partisan Review, is uncertain as to what makes up a life,
specifically his own. Because he has failed to live up to his responsibility as an autobiographer, his efforts serve more to indicate the general loss of nerve among his brand of intellectual than to help inspire future generations. But then perhaps this is precisely the stance toward experience he has in mind when he writes:

I think the whole notion of the responsibility of intellectuals has been worked to death on all sides of the political spectrum. It should be clear by now that the very nature of intellectuals demands that they be erratic, irrational, biased, and, in some respects, irresponsible. And one of the virtues of a democracy is that everyone is free to write nonsense and take the consequences.

This curious passage, however true a characterization of New York intellectuals manning the ramparts with their self-centered ideological bickering, immediately lowers our expectations for Phillips the storyteller, because to talk this way is to have no idea of what taking the consequences means in a world where genius ends by deserting duty owing to some loose thinking about the triumph of doubt.

The world in which Phillips resides has lost itself to doubt because it insisted on confusing its own conceptual activities with the larger flow of human sympathies and dilemmas. Ironically, such confusion occurred when the intellectual grandeur he fashioned for himself failed to grant him a major role in the social dramas unfolding before his very eyes. His regret about this has led him in contradictory fashion to rhetorically underplay his significance ("it never occurred to me that our history would some day be considered important..."). For all our vanity, our self-confidence, we felt like pygmies in comparison with not only the literary and intellectual figures of the more distant past, but with those who came just before us") while holding steadfastly to the notion of his supposed centrality to the intellectual life of the culture.

Such an assessment of Phillips undoubtedly appears too harsh given his stands against the pluralistic materialism of our society and his insights into the treacheries of Soviet Marxism. ("The Communists were experts at maintaining a fraternal atmosphere that distinguished sharply between insider and outsider. One couldn't just leave; one had to be expelled...") One of the most insidious things about being a Communist, perhaps about belonging to any Marxist party, has been the simultaneous inflation of one's intellectual pretensions and the shrinking of one's capacities.") But one should expect, given his privileged situation during the last 50 years, to be shown an insider's view of how ideas, beliefs, and decisions in literary circles are really arrived at. Instead, in A Susan Sontag to Norman Mailer and Simone de Beauvoir. The gossip revealed could be entertaining if it were not so out of place. Moreover, does anyone really need to know the petty desires and willful passions of these people?

Quiet intercourse with words is certainly not the stuff of high adventure, even if we do need reminders of the details of domesticity from time to time. But what needs to be embodied is the dynamic texture of the mind, as it tried to deal with the array of forces and ideas loosed in this century: How does it maintain itself in the midst of intellectual chaos? Certainly, modernism created pressures and lost opportunities; Phillips was one of the movement's most vigorous champions, yet he all but neglects those aspects; he doesn't even try to

Partisan View: Phillips's grasp of events only marginally exceeds an intellectual's parody of People Magazine. From the onset, Phillips makes it quite clear that he has rubbed shoulders with simply everyone, from Dwight Macdonald and Robert Lowell to Arthur Koestler and Jimmy Baldwin, from Lionel Trilling and

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and rejection of the CIA, his comic attempt to mediate among the little literary magazines rapaciously seeking Federal grant money, and Richard Poirier and Rutgers University’s unbelievable attempt to take over the editorial office of the Partisan Review.

The inner life that supposedly sustains Phillips through all of these trials and tribulations—especially the ones centering on whether he really was a communist (the energy expended on hair-splitting on this issue confirms our worst suspicions that even without direct affiliation, Marxism subverted whole generations)—was inspired by domestic ties and his physical health. These aspects come out in anecdotes. For example, he describes a visit that Meyer Schapiro paid to his house and says, “After he left, I said to my mother that she had seen the closest thing to a genius she would ever see—by which I meant that his mind had all the attributes of a genius. All she could say was to ask how much money he made.” As for health, Phillips casually mentions, for example, that once Philip Rahv, his coeditor, flopped in a swimming pool and “would have drowned if I had not jumped in and pulled him out. Fortunately, I had worked my way through school as a swimming counselor and lifeguard.”

All wrapped up in his own censorship circles, Phillips has the audacity to suggest that the Partisan Review’s bringing together “writers committed to modernism and literary innovation, and radical social and political thinkers” represented “the first time in this country that such an idea of intellectual community had been forged, and perhaps the last time.” What happened to our Founding Fathers or the various groups of thinkers in the 19th century? Phillips’s amnesia reveals a disdain for America’s unique intellectual contributions even as he protests the “anarchy and the insatiable appetites of the market” and “the incessant demand for novelty.” In peddling his own special brand of elitism, in offering up alleged disquisitions on weighty cultural matters, Phillips reveals how the vital connections between “thinkers” and citizens have all but come completely unraveled.

Such a soft-edged ramble through a life denies the efforts demanded to create coherence. In grasping after a pseudofame, clarity and nobility are lost. And this is even more troubling considering all the tips of intellectual icebergs which Phillips surveyed. Unfortunately, the nature of our times and temperament is exposed by Phillips’s stance toward remembering and reconstructing personal history, for in failing to penetrate the complexities of the past it is hardly possible to encourage insight and value in the future.

Historical Portraiture

W. Bruce Lincoln: In War’s Dark Shadow: The Russians Before the Great War; Dial Press; New York.

by John Moeller

Of the many reasons for reading about the past, perhaps the most natural and common one is curiosity and the love of a good story. Although it probably is the least philosophical approach, there always will be a place for the slice-of-life history because a well-written depiction of life in an ancient polis, a single battle in the midst of a larger war, or a tumultuous decade in another land during another time is intrinsically interesting. Certainly, the historian should do more than simply weave a fascinating tale, but it is the story that first captures our attention. As in literature a good story is insufficient; in addition to knowing what happened, we also want to know why. We ask the historian for causal explanations: Why did the polis and its unique institutions develop as they did? How did the stronger side waste its superiority and lose the battle? Is there a reason that turmoil suddenly intensified after years of calm? The answers never are simple and certain, in part because there are so many ways of explaining the same events.

Some historians look to great men, believing that individuals can and do mold history. They study Stalin to understand Soviet Russia in the 1930’s, and they study Gandhi to understand India during the same decade. Others, Leo Tolstoy for example, reject that premise and posit that history is the result of complex events, myriad persons, and unexplainable forces. Battles are won and lost not by great generals but by thousands of persons who have no sense of making history and by uncontrollable forces—weather, geography, unanticipated events. That is too fatalistic, suggests a third thesis, for surely events can be traced back to ideas. Some are obvious and closely related, such as the connection between Marx’s ideas expressed in the middle of the 19th century and the Russian Revolution enacted at the beginning of the 20th century. Others are more doubtful and tenuous: the supposed connection between Luther’s Reformation and the growth of German nazism. Most often, of course, there are no neat explanations and it is a combination of great men, social conditions, and ideas that engender the events we isolate for study.

Even then, when the cause of an event can be explained with a degree of certainty, the individual who first looked to the past out of curiosity may remain unsatisfied. As in every other aspect of our lives, one cannot avoid for long the overriding question: What does it mean? The answers depend on one’s perspective. For some observers the meaning of history is found not in the events themselves, but in the lives of those persons