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GRAND STREET

THE CULTURE GULCH OF THE *Times*

John L. Hess

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The New York Times, 1984.

It is hard to exaggerate the influence on our culture of *The New York Times*. The above advertisement may have succeeded; that special section probably did not deliver anywhere near four million readers, affluent or not, and the survival of colleges may not have hinged on their buying space in it. But it's not so farfetched. An ad in the *Times* every day is a costly necessity for New York theaters, its best-seller list controls displays and sales in bookstores around the country and, professionally speaking, its notices are matters of life and death for serious workers in all the arts.

Many grumble about the *Times*, but few care to do so on the record. One established journalist told me about this project: "It's a piece I could not write. I have a book coming out." That he should fear reprisal would surprise no one familiar with the recent behavior of *Times* Execu-

hate me so?" Salisbury abandons the question right there, but the foregoing may offer some answers. We might also now, after twenty-two years, reconsider Macdonald's question: Which is our greatest newspaper? Well, surely the *Times* was not greater than the *Washington Post* in the year after Watergate; the *Times's* reporting day by day is not distinctly better, and its judgment in news play is generally worse. (Stories like Reagan's joke about bombing Russia tend to get buried in the *Times* until other media demonstrate their importance.) The *Wall Street Journal* is more competent in its field, and perhaps overall. And a number of newspapers cover their own communities better than does the *Times*.

But Macdonald's question begged a larger one: Is our culture today capable of producing a great daily newspaper? The talent exists, surely. We also no doubt have many citizens of an intellectual stature comparable to that of the delegates to the Continental Congress—but we don't send the likes of them to Congress today, much less to the White House. A billionaire with vision might create a great newspaper some day. Pending that, here in our cultural capital, we are stuck with *The New York Times*. Alas.

tive Editor A. M. Rosenthal, summarized in a tabloid's headline: "Abe Doesn't Take Prisoners." Even praise here-in of worthy survivors at the *Times* might cause them harm. So in the article that follows I withhold some anecdotes as traces to them and grant most sources anonymity. I can only vouch for my accuracy and my biases as one who worked for the *Times* from 1954 to 1978 in a variety of posts, often rewarding, whose only ground for complaint is a conviction that the paper has not lived up to its best traditions. J. L. H.

When Paul Valéry was asked who was the greatest nineteenth-century French poet, he replied, "Victor Hugo, hélas." The question which is our greatest newspaper must also be answered: "*The New York Times*, alas."

So wrote Dwight Macdonald in *Esquire* in 1963 in a brilliant dissection of the cultural coverage of the *Times* and particularly its *Book Review*, which he showed to be stupid, boring, badly written and relentlessly middle-brow. It was a paper whose editorials had expressed nervousness about Picasso and Joyce, whose Sunday tyrant, Lester Markel, was "a perfect genius of Philistinism," whose daily reviewers could call Faulkner overrated and Herman Wouk "a far finer novelist than his numerous detractors admit" and whose drama critic could be described as "conducting his education in public."

Conceding that the turgid news columns of the *Times* did offer a considerable supply of facts for the patient researcher, Macdonald thundered: "But a critical judgment is not a fact and the way in which it is expressed is inseparable from it, indeed is it. Here the intellectual mediocrity that has always characterized the *Times* becomes a clear and present danger."

Momentarily, he relented. "The *Times* isn't much of a help in arts and letters," he wrote, "but neither does it exploit them in the slick, smart, knowing manner that is now common among our more lavishly produced weeklies and monthlies," offering a choice of "rustic honesty against sophisticated duplicity."

Then he turned gloomy again: "You know, it is getting better," people have been saying to me for some thirty-five years now. 'Look at that piece by X last week; not bad at all, really. And now Y and Z are writing for it.'" Macdonald said he had shared that illusion, especially when he and other "*Partisan Review* types" were asked to write for the *Book Review*, and again when Harvey Breit was editing it. But these were interludes. "No," he concluded, "it isn't getting better. It may have gotten worse."

He compared the Christmas issue of 1912, which had pieces by G. K. Chesterton, Bernard Shaw, Walter Lippmann, Ludwig Lewisohn and Louis Untermeyer, with the Christmas issue of 1962, in which "the agreeable [Edward] Weeks was the closest approach to a name."

Plus ça change . . . In the more than two decades since Macdonald's jeremiad, a dramatic transformation has swept that sector of the *Times* which its toilers call Culture Gulch. And in that time, many have said, "But you must admit it has gotten better." Like Macdonald, I reply with a symbol spanning half a century: In the mid-1920s, the *Times* subsidized Admiral Byrd's expedition to the South Pole; in the mid-1970s, it subsidized an expedition to photograph the Loch Ness monster. No, the *Times* did not get better. It got worse.

A myth has arisen that the great changes of the 1970s—the vast expansion of what broadly may be called cultural reporting in a Section C of the daily paper and its consolidation with a jazzed-up *Sunday Magazine*, *Arts and Leisure* section and *Book Review* under Executive Editor A. M. Rosenthal—were the result of financial necessity. Tom Wicker, who had been elbowed aside by Rosenthal in a struggle for power, has generously said of the transformation, "In many ways, it saved the institution." Yet myth it is.

When Dwight Macdonald was writing, the *Times* was already dominant in the richest metropolitan market in the world. The other standard-size New York dailies were dying. The tabloids were and are irrelevant—indeed, when the *Daily News* was on the verge of extinction a couple of years ago, an editor of the *Times* declared that he hoped it would survive because the *Times* did not want its readers. He meant of course that its advertisers

did not want those readers; that an editor would see it the same way illuminates the direction in which the *Times* has traveled.

A newspaper that holds a monopoly in its area is a machine for printing money. The *Times* was such a machine in the 1960s. In fact, it did not make much money. This was in part because its publishers were not good businessmen; they built a thirty million dollar plant and tore it down, they sent incompetents to manage new editions in Los Angeles and Paris which failed, and they foolishly incurred long and futile strikes. A more creditable reason, however, is that they were not particularly interested in making money. They were dedicated to putting out a great newspaper whatever it cost.

That has to explain why the *Times* survived. The *Herald-Tribune* was far livelier, better written and better edited. The composer Virgil Thomson, who was one of its music critics, explained recently that its publisher, Ogden Reid, loved fine writing, whereas the *Times* "is deeply suspicious of intellectual distinction." It was also suspicious of color and personality. ("We had a great human-interest story going there," a rewrite man growled one night, "but the desk caught it just in time.") It is related with condescension that founder Adolph Ochs long resisted the introduction of a crossword puzzle on the ground that the *Times* was not an entertainment sheet. Yet surely it was his stuffy dedication to "All the news that's fit to print" that saved the *Times*. In a world in turmoil, middle-class readers found its endless gray columns a reassuringly unchanging supply of facts. And the advertisers followed, perforce.

Even Macdonald half accepted the notion that the *Times* had to pretty up. While mocking the choice of illustrations in the *Book Review*, he said wistfully, "Only people interested in books would plow through a pictureless review section." Yet consider the *Wall Street Journal*. At the close of World War Two, with ten times the circulation of the *Journal*, the *Times* was the nation's dominant business newspaper. It also was investing in facsimile transmission with the aim of becoming the first national daily. But its business reporting and editing were atrocious and its technology faulty. With first-class journalism

and competent technology, the *Journal* overtook and surpassed the *Times*—without ever compromising its tombstone makeup.

So, contrary to myth, the *Times* did not have to take the primrose path. With a monopoly on its market, it could have kept its gray makeup and its dedication to straight news, and tried to improve its writing. Again, contrary to myth, the decision to do otherwise was not Rosenthal's but Arthur Ochs (Punch) Sulzberger's.

Young Punch had a reputation as a lightweight. On his father's retirement as a publisher in 1961, he was passed over in favor of a brother-in-law, Orvil Dryfoos, but on Dryfoos's untimely death two years later, the family decided that Punch could not be slighted again. Punch set out to prove that he had the stuff to be a captain of industry, and he did. He made the Times Company one of the Fortune 500, a communications empire. But at the start, its absurdly low per-share earnings gave it few bargaining chips for the merger game. He needed to remedy that.

His model seems to have been money machines like the *Miami Herald*, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Washington Post*, fat with all manner of sections stuffed with lucrative advertising. But the *Times* presses could only print ninety-six pages. Punch took the momentous decision to adapt them, at considerable cost, to print up to one hundred twenty-eight. He also set up task forces that would, in the current management fad, brainstorm in motel retreats to plan the *New New York Times*. The group that pondered the future content of the paper was headed by his new managing editor, A. M. Rosenthal. It was called the Product Committee.

One of the first signals to the staff of the change to come was hearing editors refer to our paper as "the product." Another sign was the appearance on the managing editor's desk of *Women's Wear Daily* and *New York* magazine. *Women's Wear* was offering a new service to the fashion trade: bitchy gossip and advice on what the Beautiful People were doing. It told garment makers and visiting buyers which discos, resorts, shows, performers, restaurants and even foods and drinks were *in* or *out* this season. Clay Felker of the defunct *Herald-Tribune* took

these services, a dash of New Journalism and a pinch of investigative reporting and created *New York* magazine, a sensationally successful vade mecum for what was then called the "upwardly mobile" and now would be called the Yuppies. Eyeing the demographics, the chairman of the *Times* Product Committee was frankly admiring. When, years later, Stephanie Harrington of *New York* asked Rosenthal if he hadn't been influenced by Felker, he replied: "You bet your sweet life!"

Rosenthal and his team, the most intellectual of whom was a former Broadway reporter named Arthur Gelb, never mastered the glitzy flair of Felker (nor did Felker's successors at *New York*, alas), but as ever the *Times* made up in quantity what it lacked in quality. The first vehicle of its Felkerization was the daily Section C, and particularly its *Living/Style*, *Home* and *Weekend* editions. When in 1976 Rosenthal took control of the Sunday department as well, with its *Magazine*, *Book Review* and *Arts and Leisure* section, he became the most powerful figure in cultural journalism.

Looking at the results a year later, Earl Shorris commented in *Harper's*: "Two themes carry through all of the new or revised sections: gossip, which is a service to the mean-spirited, and acquisitiveness, which is a service to the envious." But the *Washington Journalism Review* was more admiring:

With [the new sections] Abe Rosenthal made that dull, diligent gray lady fashionable. You can take her to a dinner party now, and instead of just going on about the finance minister of Iraq, she discusses food, clothes and decoration—gourmet food, the most elegant clothes, the most tasteful decoration. Under Rosenthal the *Times* learned its way around the Hamptons, around Soho. The paper now goes to auctions and cabarets. It has a marvelous recipe for Pintade au Vin Rouge. "For some people Craig Claiborne is now the most important writer in the paper," says [James] Reston, uncritically.

Food, clothing and décor as cultural news—why not? That the review of an expensive restaurant should receive

more space and editorial concern than that of a new symphony may be only a quibble. The joke on the Yuppie readers, including the *Washington Journalism Review*, was that the elegance and taste were spurious and at times meretricious.

Claiborne, for example, enlisted as his partner the executive chef of Howard Johnson's, and they did not disdain to plug Howard Johnson's canned beef gravy. The Claiborne style was women's page twitter: ". . . quite swallowable" . . . "wonderfully versatile, if not to say sublime" . . . "the vegetables with which we dipped were eminently serviceable" . . . "since we are enthusiastic in depth for the cooking of China, Mexico, India and so on, we find fresh coriander absolutely essential to our peace of mind" . . . "An untrimmed sandwich is in my eyes vulgar, crude and uncouth." The theme, the essential ingredient of "elegance" at the *Times* today, is money—the infamous Page 1 \$4,000 dinner for two, the homey meal for eight at \$900, a full-page *Magazine* spread on what to do with leftover caviar (one recipe calling for a full pound).

The Claiborne style is much admired in Culture Gulch. A recent *Home* section featured the décor of a nouveau milliardaire's private jet, including sculpture by Rodin, Brancusi, Moore and Giacometti—the last in the plane's toilet. It said he wouldn't fly without a supply of his favorite hors d'oeuvres: Doritos with peanut butter and jelly. The high life, *quoi*. Helpful service pieces for the newly affluent are headlined "Life With a Live-In Servant" or "Putting the Pool Under Glass: A Benefit Is Year-Round Use." These people need help. They are informed about the entry of custom bathroom plumbing into living spaces, about the chic tenement look, and about a beach house that mingles "seriousness and whimsy, dignity and playfulness" and "while deferential to the sea, manages not to roll over and play dead beside it." A sample lead: "Have you ever wondered how television stars on the way up live?" Another feature, about a decorator setting up a party at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, opens: "How dare he rival the masters, this blue-eyed son of Greek parents, this Christos Giftos, mounted on a ladder, his face buried in blossoms?" How dare he, indeed?

Serious problems were not excluded from the new

New York Times. A *Magazine* piece headed "THE SQUEEZE ON THE MIDDLE CLASS" described the effect of inflation on a young, childless suburban couple earning only \$60,000 a year in 1980 dollars. But it expunged the lower classes—those unlikely to shop at Bloomingdale's. Space for city news was cut hard and, worse, limited to zones of affluence. When I asked at a staff meeting in 1976 why we had a correspondent in exurban Suffolk County but none in the Bronx, Rosenthal's second-in-command, Seymour Topping, replied: "We have more readers in Suffolk." This seemed to me a non sequitur; the *Times* then had four correspondents in Africa. The Bronx was burning, a big story, but Bloomingdale's was not interested, so neither was the *Times*. Soon afterward, it sent a second reporter to Suffolk and a dozen more to nearer suburbs, but none to the Bronx. Not long ago a dispatch from Mount Vernon, which borders on the Bronx, identified it as "this suburb of Manhattan," and a dispatch from Grenada helpfully described it as the size of Martha's Vineyard—which is also, it did not say, the size of Queens. . . .

Rosenthal was pleased to repeat something that Harrison Salisbury, his gentle and unsuccessful rival for the top news job, had told him: "Well, Abe, you're gonna be the first managing editor of the *New York Times* who will have to worry about money." Salisbury, however, was worrying about the news-gathering budget; Rosenthal was the first managing editor to worry about the bottom line, profits, and to consider advertising and demographics in shaping news strategy. He said Clay Felker "was the best originator of service material I've ever seen. He used to drive me out of my mind!" Under Rosenthal's direction, service material drew a flood of ads. Profits soared, and *Times* stock was split three for one.

Oddly, Rosenthal's team never mastered a new kind of service material, consumer reporting, which was being taken up by the best media around the country. A series of reporters were assigned by the *Times* to the consumer beat, but crashed on the editors' insistence on impartiality. An early casualty, Frances Cerra, has written in *Quill*: "The *Times*, probably more than any other news-

paper, has enshrined the goal of objectivity to the point where it has become a muzzle upon its reporting staff." She eventually quit after a piece of hers was killed that accurately foresaw the economic disaster of a nuclear power project on Long Island and she was ordered off the topic as biased. A preferred successor wrote an editorial in 1980 headed, "So It's a Carcinogen, But How Bad?" A nice headline in 1984: "Science Meeting Hears 2 Sides of Toxic Waste." *That's* balance.

Objectivity was only one of the traditional values of the *Times* that Rosenthal pledged to preserve while adding revenue and readers. He told Stephanie Harrington that he hoped the *Magazine* would thenceforth "have the highest intellectual content in the world." This was apparently an allusion to the dullness and predictability for which it had been celebrated. An old joke had it that Lester Markel made Barbara Ward rewrite an article seven times, and published all seven drafts. But Markel's *Magazine* was serious. Under Rosenthal, it would run a hard-breathing cover story on the "real" Cary Grant—his ineffable charm, his trips on LSD, his lifelong *fear of girls!* The piece was one of several reprinted in *US*, an inferior imitation of *People* magazine launched by the Times Company. (As noted, the *Times* never did manage a flair for vulgarity; *US* lost money until it was sold to a more efficient entrepreneur.) An *US* editor, looking back at the Grant story, said, "It was just right for *US*—not quite up to *New York* magazine."

But it was quite up to the *Sunday Times Magazine* under Edward Klein, a Rosenthal recruit from *Newsweek* who abruptly replaced the serious-minded Lewis Bergman. "Under Lewis," an editor said, "words and ideas mattered. Under Ed, the thing is not to get Abe mad." Friends of Rosenthal and Gelb, such as Beverly Sills, Mike Nichols and Joseph Heller, and conservative public figures such as Henry Kissinger, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Edward Koch and Pat Moynihan were assured of admiring coverage, while Bella Abzug, for instance, in her race with Moynihan, would be denigrated in pictures and prose. Two of the most notorious covers of the Rosenthal-Klein era were those on the party-giving fashion designers, the Oscar de la Rentas, headed "Living Well Is Still the Best

Revenge," and on Jerzy Kosinski, of which more later.

"The emphasis now," the anonymous editor said, "is on how the *Magazine* looks. We'll print the most appalling shit if the art is good. You get a good picture for the cover, then you rush out a piece you might have thrown away. That's how 'Cambodia' happened—they committed the cover." The reference was to an absurd piece about a hike into rebel-held Cambodia. When Alexander Cockburn revealed in the *Village Voice* that paragraphs had been lifted from a novel by André Malraux, the *Times* ignored it until four weeks later the *Washington Post* exposed the whole piece as a hoax. Thereupon the *Times* performed a shocked autopsy of the affair, void of any self-criticism. Similarly, when Sophy Burnham advised Klein she had been plagiarized by Stephen Birmingham in a *Magazine* article, she had to threaten a lawsuit to get a grudging acknowledgment of the coincidences. And when Section C splashed the discovery of Egyptian hieroglyphics that confirmed the Biblical parting of the Red Sea, the exposure of the hoax in learned journals was never fully explained in the *Times*. As the anonymous *Magazine* editor put it: "I often reassure new writers: 'Don't worry, our standards are very low now.'"

Klein has been quoted as defining the standards thus: "If Abe likes it, I love it." William Honan, who directs Section C and *Arts and Leisure* under the title Culture Editor, has said much the same. And their loyalty is requited. For at least five years, the *Times* has been swept by wistful rumors that Klein was about to be fired for his latest gaffe. As this is written, the firing has not yet occurred. The consensus on the paper is that Rosenthal will not expose an error of judgment by sacking an appointee under fire; an office humorist suggests that Klein, aware of this, kept his place by committing a new horror whenever the memory of the last one had begun to fade.

A kinder explanation is that Rosenthal, a sentimental man, values loyalty above all other virtues. Only this can account for his appointment as editor of the *Book Review* of Mitchell Levitas, whose abrupt removal as metropolitan editor a while before had set off a champagne celebration by the city staff, and who had been credited with recommending the Cambodia piece to Klein. A writer

said of the appointment, "It shows what Rosenthal thinks of books."

One of the *Review* editors said that Levitas had "an active, positive malice toward literary persons," that he "had no idea how to assemble a stable of good reviewers," that he was "trotting down to the Third Floor all the time" for approval and instructions, and that he was often overruled, which meant yanking a major piece near deadline. "I felt as though I was working on *Pravda*," the editor said. It was a sad echo of a comment by R. P. Blackmur in the *Kenyon Review* back in 1959: "It was not money that was needed by the managing editor . . . ; it was such a change of psychology as would permit him to appoint a strong and independent editor of the *Book Review* and then to abide by that editor's decisions."

That was almost the situation during John Leonard's editorship in 1971-75. Leonard recalls that he occasionally got flak from Dan Schwartz, the Sunday editor, as when he dedicated most of an issue to Neil Sheehan's passionate essay on Vietnam books. He thinks he was close to being fired for it, but raves in national media calmed Schwartz's nerves. There was no prior restraint, however, until Rosenthal took over the Sunday sections.

Leonard had meanwhile returned by choice to writing for the daily. He was probably the most brilliant and distinctive writer on the paper, and developed a wide following. But he also met growing editorial control. Early on, a piece of his about censorship in the Philippines was killed by James Greenfield, a Rosenthal factotum. Leonard revised it and slipped it to the *Book Review*. It is Leonard's view that nobody could get away with that now.

Under the new standards, politics and personal friendships and dislikes became decisive. Leonard reviews of a Lou Cannon book on Reagan and of Judith Exner's scandalous one on John F. Kennedy were killed, and his praise of a Nat Hentoff work was watered down, he says, "into a book report." Rosenthal told him his praise of I. F. Stone was excessive, and Honan, the Culture Editor, said of another review, "You can't call somebody a Marxist—it's libelous!" Gelb asked him one day what he was going to say about a Joseph Heller novel; when he expressed surprise at the question, Gelb explained that he was running

a cover piece on Heller in the *Magazine*. Heller was a friend of Gelb and Rosenthal. So was Betty Friedan. When Leonard panned Friedan's revisionist book *The Second Stage*, Gelb protested, "This belongs on the editorial page!" Leonard was cut from two reviews a week to one. He finally quit.

Dwight Macdonald was probably wrong to wish that the *Book Review* might become something like the *New York Review of Books*, whose birth he announced in his article. The *Times*, like its readers, has to be middle-brow, and its reviews should try to cover the news about books. But there is no excuse for its coverage to be boring, dimwitted and petty. As it often is.

The makeup has changed, but basically the *Book Review* is pretty much as Macdonald found it. He grumbled about the crass commercialism of the best-seller list and said the editors, who were rather ashamed of it too, planned to cut it from fifteen books to ten—cutting off the dog's tail an inch at a time, so to speak. Instead, they have computerized it and now list sixty-five best-sellers. (It's still controversial. One author has sued because his book sold 100,000 copies but never made the list; another, Stephen King, chortles that his *Pet Sematary* made the list before it reached the bookstores. But no matter.)

Macdonald quoted George Kennan as saying, "The letters are dull because they reject 'controversial' ones." More precisely, the rule still is that the *Book Review* prints no letter that reflects on the judgment of the editors. In 1978, after long protest, it published letters by Ellen Willis and Susan Sherman responding to an attack on a feminist novel—but it deleted their objection to the assignment of the book to an antifeminist ideologue and their charge of general hostility to feminist writing. (The editor twisted the knife by inserting the abjured titles "Mrs." and "Miss" in their letters.) In 1984, the *Review* published a cover piece on Ed Koch's *Mayor* by Gay Talese, Rosenthal's friend, biographer and admirer. ("In my lifetime," Talese had told *New York* magazine, "I don't know anybody who has the talent Rosenthal has as an administrator, writer and editor.") It was the only favorable review of that nasty book I have seen. It was, in fact, a rave, closing with this

comment on Koch's presidential dreams: "Why not, someday, the Jewish comic Mayor from New York—the man who stood up to the unions, who restored fiscal sanity to the budget, and who is the first white man in New York to talk back to a black? Why not indeed?" Differing opinions, including mine, were not published.

Selden Rodman told Macdonald his experience with the *Review*: "When poetry started getting academic and dull and I said so . . . I was no longer given poetry. Ditto with art books—as soon as it was clear I was attacking the Establishment (the MOMA, abstract expressionism, the Greenberg-Hess axis) I no longer got art books." People in all the arts still complain that Culture Gulch serves mainly the big institutions and scants what is truly new. An apparent exception was the pricey New York "avant-garde," centered in a few uptown galleries and patronized by such as Nelson Rockefeller. The critic John Canaday didn't care for it; another critic was engaged to reassure the art crowd and ultimately to replace him.

Two personal anecdotes: From Paris once, I tipped New York that trustees of the Museum of Modern Art were negotiating to buy the fabled Gertrude Stein collection and divvy it up among themselves and the museum. Gelb replied that to print the story might cause the French government to queer the deal. (I chided him that that was none of our concern, to no avail.) Back in New York in 1973, when Canaday blew the whistle on secret sales of art by the Metropolitan Museum, I was assigned to check his story; I found abuses even worse than he had charged. It was a great series, which ran for months with Gelb's support but then met increasing shortage of space and complaints by Hilton Kramer and others in the trade. I had to threaten to resign to get my last piece in the paper. The gamy underside of the art biz has been largely ignored by the *Times* ever since. First I and then Canaday were persuaded to review restaurants.* Eventually we both left.

* The editors did not consider the assignment a demotion. On the contrary, it was accompanied by a pay increase and a substantial expense account. Incidentally, the system of rating restaurants by stars was extended to colleges in a *Times* guidebook that judged campuses for ambiance among other qualities—not including food, however.

Virgil Thomson jokes that the *Book Review* must alter-nate editors, because he finds about one issue in four interesting. Macdonald long ago noted that the *Review* lifted its sights during the brief reign of Harvey Breit, and always when it used British guest reviewers. "Even the *Times* can't get Englishmen to write badly," he said. Just so, the prose of Culture Gulch has lately been enhanced by such imports as the art critic John Russell, the drama critic Benedict Nightingale and the bookman John Gross. But Nightingale soon left.

At the time Macdonald was writing, it was almost unheard of for anybody to quit the *Times*. In the Rosenthal era, the departure of the best and the brightest has been endemic, and a customary salute to the parting by colleagues is a heartfelt "Congratulations!" One reason antedates Rosenthal but persisted: the inane editing. Renata Adler, who reviewed movies in 1968, has written: "The idea at the *Times* is that reviews are not edited at all, but the reality was a continual leaning on sentences, cracking rhythms, removing or explaining jokes, questioning or crazily amplifying metaphors and allusions." She cited a movie's reference to one Jean-Sol Partre, which an editor "helpfully explained in a parenthesis to be 'a pun on the name Jean-Paul Sartre.'" Everybody who writes for the *Times* has a thousand scars like that. A typical case in the paper before me as I write (August 30, 1984): "Mr. Gemayel, who neither drank nor smoked, married his wife, Genevieve, in 1934." The reporter whose name appeared on that article certainly did not commit that sentence. A piece of mine from Paris that referred to the Boul' Mich' came out reading Boulevard Michigan. An article of mine with the phrase "at a time when the stock market was going down" came out "at a time when, according to officials, the stock market was going down." This last is a remarkable example of the *Times's* "objectivity" gone insane.

The conflict between writers seeking to express their individual talents and an army of copy editors dedicated to reducing them to gray homogeneity goes 'way back on the *Times*, but it turned bloody under Rosenthal. The upheaval of 1968 was a watershed. Then metropolitan edi-

tor, Rosenthal accompanied police officials to a disturbance at Columbia University and was horrified; he wrote what young reporters considered to be a less than objective report. Later Anthony Lukas, one of the brightest, publicly lamented that the *Washington Post* had been able to cover the trial of the Chicago Seven "in a way that has been almost impossible for those of us operating under tighter restrictions." Lukas then chose freedom. In *New York* magazine, Edwin Diamond reported that the reviews of John Leonard, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt and Vincent Canby were meeting editorial objections, that an interview of Jean Genet by Israel Shenker had been killed (Genet deplored the repression of the Black Panthers) and that a review by Clive Barnes of a play about the Rosenbergs had been censored. This last led to the gathering of a group of *Times* writers who obtained a meeting with Rosenthal and underwent a stormy lecture. "The Cabal," as it was called in an allusion to Rosenthal's paranoia, soon subsided.

Diamond surmised that Rosenthal was feeling the heat from Vice President Spiro Agnew, who (with William Safire as his ghost) was denouncing the *Times* as the most nattering of the nabobs of negativism, the most élitist of the organs of Eastern liberalism. This underestimates Rosenthal's nerve, and his Archie Bunker standards. He found Judith Exner's revelations about Kennedy's sexual conduct unfit to print even if true, and he paid Agnew an unusual tribute that has not, I believe, been previously reported. When Agnew pleaded no contest to charges involving his taking of bribes, the *Times* Style Book had for some years dictated that a convicted felon was not entitled to the dignity of a "Mr." Rosenthal could not so denigrate a man who had been only the proverbial heart-beat away from the Presidency of the United States. He amended the Style Book on the spot. Since then, bowing to the hobgoblin of consistency, the *Times* has Mistered rapists, murderers, child-molesters and bribe-takers alike.

A "Cabal" of sorts reappeared in April 1978. It was a case of history repeating itself, the second time as a farce. The unlikely subject was *Dancin'*, a costly musical mounted by the Shuberts and Columbia Pictures. It had received considerable advance publicity in the *Times*, as

big-ticket shows do. Arthur Gelb, Rosenthal's minister in charge of all the cultural sections, ordered Richard Eder, the drama critic, to leave the choreography aside for separate, qualified treatment by the dance critic, Anna Kisselgoff. Eder recalls returning from the opening to find Gelb waiting for him. What did he think of the show? Eder looked surprised and Gelb said that he was thinking of running his review on the front page. (See Leonard above.) Eder said he had found some things good and some things bad; his review ran inside. It opened: "With appealing audacity, the proclamation is made right at the start that this is to be 'an almost plotless musical.' But it is like the frosting declaring its independence from the cake." It reported that there were "a few marvelous numbers, and a good many weak ones," but concluded that the show was "a gaudy mask covering nothing: a deification of emptiness." The next day, Eder heard nothing directly from management, but that office bearer of bad news, John Corry, told him, "Boy, are they mad." Their discomfiture was no doubt deepened by the Sunday report of Walter Kerr, which was headlined: "Dancin' Needs More Than Dancin'."

Times readers never did get an expert opinion on the dancin'. Kisselgoff's critical review was killed. It was this that sparked the second "Cabal"—that is, a letter signed by most of the *Times*'s critics, expressing a concern about editorial interference and requesting a meeting with Rosenthal. Instead, he called them in one by one and accused them of insolence and disloyalty, with intent to defame him by a leak to *New York* magazine. The story did not leak, and that was all there was to the second Cabal. Looking back on it, John Leonard says that what he now regrets most was Rosenthal's and Gelb's assurance to him that Eder's job was safe and that he could write whatever he chose. "They lied to me," he said.

Eder recalls a series of complaints from Rosenthal and Gelb over the year following *Dancin'*.

"Abe told me I had an insufficient sense of the fun of the theater, I was too judgmental," he said recently. "I replied that there wasn't much fun to be had just then. When there was, I was happy to report it. I thought I was rendering a service in holding up a mirror. The reason it hurt

is that I did love the theater. You have to be angry. . . . I said in a speech about then that the theater reviewer of the *Times* has to be ready to be fired, that the only way to do the job well is to be willing to lose it."

What appears to have been the last straw was the musical of *I Remember Mama*, starring Liv Ullman. It was another big and much publicized show, which Eder described as "not a marriage but a divorce of talents" and "a tedious failure." Still, the show sold lots of tickets, and the *Daily News*'s gossip columnist Liz Smith sneered that Eder could not pick a winner. Rosenthal called him in and offered him a demotion to second-string critic. He declined that and accepted an assignment to Paris instead, but resigned not long afterward and took his critical talents to the *Los Angeles Times*.

Many colleagues and competitors regard Eder as one of the most brilliant and thoughtful critics to have served the *Times* and the theater. The consensus is that, though there *was* pressure from the industry to oust him, what moved Rosenthal and Gelb in the end was their inability to control him and so to influence the theater, to reward people and shows that they liked. Gelb, himself a former Broadway news reporter, had once told Eder he loved the tension of opening nights when the *Times* critic dashed up the aisle and everybody else waited for his verdict, to know whether the curtain would rise again. This power (over serious plays if not fluff) has troubled many theater lovers including *Times* critics. Rosenthal and Gelb love it.

A veteran critic described the post-Eder situation this way: "When a show comes in produced by a bunch of investors from New Orleans and it stinks, the *Times* justifiably kills it. But when the networks and Broadway blow five million on a show and it stinks, the *Times* ties itself into knots to avoid saying so."

Along with others, this critic admired the knot-tying craftsmanship of Eder's successor, Frank Rich. He cited Rich's review of *Cats*, a dreadful British musical imported by the Shuberts in late 1982. Rich's lead said accurately that it would be around a long time—not because it was brilliant or affecting or "has an idea in its head," nor because of all the publicity, but because it "transports the

audience into a complete fantasy world." "Whatever the other failings and excesses, even banalities, of 'Cats,' it believes in purely theatrical magic, and on that faith it unquestionably delivers." Beginning in the seventh paragraph, the show "curls up and takes a catnap" and we learn that the choreography "does not add to quality" and just about everything else stinks, but the review closes on "a theater overflowing with wondrous spectacle—and that's an enchanting place to be." The ads write themselves: "Theatrical Magic'—*Times*" or "Wondrous Spectacle'—Frank Rich."

"It's sad," the veteran critic said. "New Yorkers are wise to it, but out-of-towners see those ads and say, 'The *Times* likes it, let's go.'"

Knot-tying is a common practice at the *Times*. Many reporters play the official puff straight but tuck in a few unpleasant facts well down in the story. Combining praise and blame covers both flanks. One recent restaurant reviewer developed a sort of oxymoronic criticism: One place was "glowing and plush, if undistinguished," another was "undistinguished" but "bright and felicitous," a third "colorful and refreshing but head-splittingly noisy," a fourth "pleasant, comfortable and unprepossessing." In a fifth, the beef was "fine if served rare but dull if overcooked," while in a sixth it was the pasta that was fine "provided it is not undercooked or overcooked."

The most embarrassing episode in recent *Times* history began early in 1982 with one of those fan pieces that afflict the Sunday *Magazine*. This one was by Barbara Gelb, a frequent contributor who is also the wife of the *Times's* minister of culture. It was about Jerzy Kosinski, the novelist and café-society character whose portrait in polo costume, bare to the waist, graced the cover. The piece said he'd learned to ride in a Polish orphanage, and recounted similarly improbable adventures in his escapes from Nazi and Soviet occupation, culminating in his emergence as a literary genius and the husband of an American heiress. Calvin Trillin has written that it was fortunate that Kosinski didn't tell Mrs. Gelb he was the long lost Princess Anastasia. Staff members now say Mrs. Gelb was quite aware of Kosinski's reputation as a fabulist

and of the fact that he hired editors to vet his prose but decided it would be unkind to say so. A reason cited by others is a passage quoting a sick friend whom Kosinski had visited: "I've never experienced such solicitude from another man." The friend was not identified. He was Abe Rosenthal.

Three days after the Gelb piece appeared, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt reviewed Kosinski's eighth novel in the *Times* and observed, "The author's long affair with the English language is not going well." Nothing the author had done since his first, autobiographical novel, *The Painted Bird*, seemed to the critic to have any value.

The *Magazine* blurb was fading in memory when the *Village Voice*, four months later, ran a piece headed "Jerzy Kosinski's Tainted Words." In it Geoffrey Stokes and Eliot Fremont-Smith, a former *Times* critic, revealed that Kosinski's editorial help was more extensive than had been known, and hinted that it was not certain that he had actually written *The Painted Bird*.

Now, the *Times* has long regarded the *Voice* as unworthy of mention in its columns (a rule that was once laid down to me by Gelb). Not this time. Michiko Kakutani, a young reporter on the book beat, was assigned to expose the slander. After several weeks of investigation that included an encounter with Kosinski, she asked to be excused. John Corry stepped in to fill the breach.

It was a turning point in his career. Until then, Corry had been a bright writer on small matters, chiefly involving the Beautiful People. Earl Shorris had written in *Harper's* (October 1977): "John Corry's column is the paradigm of the new [*Times*] sections. He idealizes the rich with overt bootlicking, teaching manners and morals to ordinary people as Gucci teaches shopgirls their place by closing during lunch hour."

Corry took over the new assignment with enthusiasm. In a phone call to the *Voice*, which it recorded, he said: "Do you think the *Times* wants to rehabilitate Jerzy Kosinski? Sure, so do I. I want to exonerate him. He was slandered." The rehabilitation took the form of a six-thousand-word polemic bannered in *Arts and Leisure* on November 7, 1982: "A Case History: 17 years of Ideological Attack on a Cultural Target." Its thrust was that

the *Voice* smear was only the latest in a long campaign mounted by the KGB.

The salvo shocked *Times* staffers and readers alike. The *Times* had a long tradition of professed objectivity. Rosenthal himself reminded the staff of that whenever a liberal bias seemed to him to have slipped past the desk, and Gelb, as noted, had told Leonard that his feminist opinion belonged on the editorial page, not in a book review. Another *Times* rule had been to regard outside criticism as beneath notice. Now, when Charles Kaiser wrote in *Newsweek* that the Kosinski blast had been "a spectacular example of overkill," columnist William Safire described Kaiser as a disgruntled former *Times* man, and Rosenthal told the Moonies' *Washington Times*, "I was happy to see him go.* To many staffers, among them the most eminent, it seemed that an era of personal favoritism and spite had taken over a paper once dedicated to telling the news "without fear or favor."

John F. Baker of *Publishers Weekly* drew further implications. While saluting the *Times* as "the premier book review resource in the country" and its criticism as "generally intelligent," he wrote:

But at a time when the *Times* seems to be growing increasingly conservative in tone—as indicated by such straws in the wind as its concentration on terrorism as a Communist monopoly and its highly equivocal attitude toward the nuclear freeze movement—publishers who specialize in books critical of the social and political status quo are beginning to worry.

On several recent occasions we have heard complaints from such publishers that their books were either not reviewed at all or were relegated to a lower status than seemed appropriate (and in order to make clear that this is not a case of special pleading, it should be noted that other major book review sections gave the books in question the kind of space the publishers felt they deserved). We are not suggesting that anyone at the *Times* is deliberately ignoring or relegating to lesser review status books that advocate controversial or unpopular ideas; that may not even be necessary. When a certain kind of climate of opinion has been created, it tends to be self-perpetuating, in the sense that people working within that

climate learn to read signals and to second-guess themselves. In most ways that count, the *Times* remains a great newspaper. But it would be a sad day for its readers, and for the publishers who publish for its readers, if the kinds of attitudes embodied in the Kosinski story were to become more firmly rooted.

The sad day was already there. An example prior to the Corry piece was another splash in *Arts and Leisure*, by Flora Lewis. It was about the forthcoming Costa-Gavras movie *Missing*, a dramatization of a book about the murder of an American during the Chilean coup of 1973. Like most critics, Vincent Canby would find the picture gripping; Lewis saw it as a slander of the U. S. Embassy. Her own bias is at least consistent. Thirty years ago, she wrote a still memorable paean in the *Magazine* to the pistol-packing U. S. ambassador who overthrew the last democratic government of Guatemala; in a 1984 dispatch she referred to "the overthrow of Chile's pro-Soviet Government of Salvador Allende"—who was, of course, a democratic socialist. But in the old *New York Times*, reporters with sympathies toward the Right might be offset by such distinguished, if disparate, luminaries as Harrison Salisbury, David Halberstam, Homer Bigart and Herbert Matthews. Under Rosenthal, the foreign staff has been steadily purged of liberals and loaded with Right-thinking ideologues.

Culture Gulch was not neglected. Following his Kosinski exploit, the gossip Corry was promoted to TV critic in charge of serious material and the able John O'Connor was restricted to entertainment. Objectivity took on new meaning. Corry denounced a balanced documentary on the Alger Hiss case on the ground that, since the courts had found Hiss guilty, any evenhanded treatment must be ipso facto biased. On an Oxford Union debate between Caspar Weinberger and E. P. Thompson, the peace activist, he wrote: "Mr. Weinberger makes a good case rather poorly. Mr. Thompson, by contrast, takes a bankrupt case and makes it rather well." Corry complained that *The Day After*, ABC's drama on nuclear war, "engenders a feeling of hopelessness" and "conditioned us to accept disarmament, or at least, to call for a nuclear freeze." He

dissented from the notion that Walter Cronkite was a fair reporter, recalling that the fellow had said in 1968 that the only "rational" solution in Vietnam was to negotiate. "He virtually declared peace!" Corry exclaimed.

In the same column, Corry said: "A high point of this season's political coverage was David Brinkley's comment that 'a machine, an honest machine, is still the best way to run a city.' This viewer treasures the moment, not only because he agreed with Mr. Brinkley, but also because of Mr. Brinkley's style."

In this, Corry was agreeing not only with Brinkley but also with his superiors. In 1976, when I was trying to expose how thievery and waste had contributed to the near bankruptcy of New York, the editor in charge of city politics chided me, "Corruption is the lubricant of democracy." The next year, Stephanie Harrington commented in *New York* magazine (July 18, 1977): "The profiles of public officials served up by the paper would lead a visiting Tibetan to suppose that the city's political machinery runs on holy water." (Headline on a piece about Edward Koch, running for re-election in 1981: "Tough, Yet Benign Mayor.")

To be sure, this policy goes a long way back. Robert Caro's *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Downfall of New York* (Knopf, 1974) is a terrible indictment of the *Times*. Moses was the czar of New York from 1934 to 1968 and very nearly destroyed its physical fiber. During that time, when Moses was not writing for the *Times* he was being praised in it. "The *New York Times* fell down on its knees before him and stayed there year after year after year," Caro wrote. "The *Times* and other papers printed Moses's handouts as if they were gospel, fawned on him in thousands of editorials, brushed aside citizens with evidence and even proof of wrongdoing and put down those few on their staffs who itched to investigate what he really was doing."

This is not a digression. Surely nothing so profoundly affects our culture as architecture, zoning and transportation. When Moses was ravaging the city according to the dictates of self and modernism, Lewis Mumford was hurling imprecations from the *New Yorker* and Jane Jacobs fought him to a standstill in one corner of Manhat-

tan, but their effect was marginal. "Unfortunately," Mumford said, "there is a huge vested interest in raising hell with nature, and there is very little money—in fact, none at all—in letting well enough alone." And besides, Moses and his bulldozers had the support of the mighty *Times*.

Moses is long gone, but nothing has changed. Zoning policy and development have in fact grown worse; hideous high-rises spread across a shrinking sky. It is an ill bird that fouls its own nest, yet the *Times* enthusiastically supports billion-dollar projects that will strangle its own neighborhood. In one of those demented exchanges of air space so popular with developers, the once handsome and rococo and now modern-uglified Times Tower is to be razed. One proposal is to put an 80-foot Big Apple in its place. The *Times* architectural critic, Paul Goldberger, gave it the treatment that Frank Rich would give a *Cats*:

The Venturi plan is shocking, difficult to accept at first—and brilliant. Like the best sculpture of Claes Oldenburg, the apple has meaning as a symbol and as an abstraction, and the genius of this work lies in its ability to manipulate proportion and the element of surprise in such a way as to make us think of the apple as a monumental object, not as a common piece of fruit.

Goldberger is normally wary in his judgments, but he did boldly allow *Newsweek* to quote him as saying of Arthur Gelb, "He is one of those extraordinary forces, like Harold Ross must have been at the *New Yorker*." (Ross was of course the man who hired Lewis Mumford.) A colleague told Goldberger, "That's a Pulitzer quote," and sure enough the *Times* nominated him for, and he obtained, a 1984 Pulitzer Prize for criticism. The *Times* reported later that the Pulitzer Board had overruled its jury in granting the award for a novel. It did not report what was thought newsworthy elsewhere, that the board had also overruled its juries in ten of the twelve journalism categories, including the award to Goldberger.

In a kindly memoir of the *Times*, *Without Fear or Favor*, Harrison Salisbury offers a glimpse of Rosenthal, looking across the city room and asking, "Why do people