

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898)

Introduction

Autobiography, in the high formal sense, can include texts in which the author writes about him/her self as though about a third person, or, as in the present author's work, as though about an historical figure embedded in the weave of events:

These deliverances of the Emperor's could not have been entirely without foundation, even though he should not expect that I should not take advantage of my social relations with Metternich to the extent of breaking the confidence reposed in me. (P. 97)

It is true that Bismarck uses the first person pronoun to define himself, but look at the gap between true personal identity and public persona, the persona Bismarck ascribes to himself in the passage above.

The man writing the above might well have thought of himself, even felt himself, as a part of history, for when we turn to the diplomatic/political dynamic of nineteenth century Europe, we will hardly find a more prominent or forceful player than Bismarck. He was raised into a Europe which was just coming to terms with its nineteenth century break from the stable values and institutions of the preceding century. His own upbringing, as the child of a Prussian noble family, led him to an early identification with older values: he, Bismarck, was a young monarchist, a believer in the divine destiny of the Prussian monarchy, devoted to the land—agriculture, for him and his cohort, being the mother of all virtues, incomparably richer than the (then starting up) products of the industrial age. He was an anti-democratic parliamentarian, who accepted the limited value of a national deliberative body but not of one that overrode the King in the passing of legislation. This was the core Bismarck, the figure he characterizes, we might say 'stiffly,' in the *Reflections and Reminiscences* we are reading.

Bismarck's life, as you will see in this week's reading, was one that exposed him to the world events of his time—the Restoration after Napoleon's Revolution, the European uprisings of 1848, the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. Yet Bismarck's text is also seeded with episode and anecdote that brings the large political picture into a miniature human light—and that make the reading of these *Reflections* a surprising delight. Typical of Bismarck at his most thoughtful are phrasings like: 'I have never regarded birth as a substitute for want of ability; whenever I have come forward on behalf of landed property it has not been in the interest of proprietors of my own class, but because I see in the decline of agriculture one of the greatest dangers to our permanence as a state' (p.28); while typical of Bismarck at his most charming (and frequent, too) are the passages in which he debunks the grand, observing that in France the wearing of medals, honorary chest decorations, was absolutely compelling to crowds, so that when even a small fry local official, chest covered with medals, appeared before a crowd, the mob dispersed in respect. We come closer, here, to the remarkable Bismarck, who not long before being dismissed from his Chancellorship by Frederick William, generated and passed extraordinarily modern legislation, through the then unified German parliament—legislation providing for kinds of social welfare/security which addressed the needs of the whole people, and far exceeded any previous achievements of European governance.

Readings: Bismarck, Otto von, *Reflections and Reminiscences* (New York, 1968)

Questions:

The autobiographer faces a strategic writing problem. He/she ages, matures, in the guise of narrator of the autobiography. Should this change be reflected in the life writer's own style and perspective? How does Bismarck handle this? Is the narrator stable or mobile, as he presents his text?

Does Bismarck, as life writer, think and write in terms of 'us and them,' 'us Prussians and our enemies the French,' or does he have a broad vision of European unities which are out there to be sought for?

What does war mean to Bismarck, as he tries to sketch his view of his life and world? Does he conceive of himself as a militarist? Does he see under the surface of European hostilities to the human stratum underlying them?