

Remembrance of Politics Past

January 18, 2011



IF THE PURPOSE OF A MEMOIR is to tell the story of a life or the evolution of an individual's thinking, this one by Christopher Hitchens, the jowly, balding erstwhile *enfant terrible* doesn't ring true. There's no metamorphosis in thinking here — it's more a whipsawing of opinion if not a trading up. And despite a heavy lathering of opinions, there's precious little of his adult life as lived. There's really very little in *Hitch 22* that can't be gleaned from any collection of his essays or even books, where he alternates between playing the clown prince and issuing Jeremiads against the godly and — less frequently now — the elected if not the elect. Considering that Hitchens' (and it's Hitchens, Hitch, or Christopher, never Chris, he says) likes and dislikes are as little a mystery to the reading public as are Joe Biden's hair plugs or the absence of yellow cake in pre-invasion Iraq, Hitch's tell-all again might seem awfully familiar or even redundant. And it is.

Not boring, though. Never boring. And certainly not ghosted. And — despite what follows here — a fine read. Plus, his asides to fiction and to poetry well worth reading and knowing are bonuses in their own right if not always relevant to his points. He's at least a replacement for the late mid-brow Clifton Fadiman or the overpriced and necessarily pretentious Britannica Great Books series. Still, at the end of *Hitch 22* we know no more about the man and why he thinks the way he does than before. Beyond a certain self reverential quality and a quirkiness that makes his acidic pronouncements seem overdone if not camp, it just may be there's — just as Gertrude Stein said about Oakland, Cal. — "no there there."

Take these remarks, offered over time.

In reviewing Walter Isaacson's biography of Henry Kissinger after its 1992 publication, Hitchens wrote:

It became very clear to me, as I finished the book, that if I were to employ the argot of popular psychology, I could say I had been reading the profile of a serial murderer.... From being a foe of Zionism when it looked like losing in 1948, to becoming an advocate of its most racist and absolutist application when it was a power to be reckoned with, is not second nature to Kissinger. It is his nature. There is no irony to ponder here, unless you consider Hannibal Lecter an ironist.

Jump ahead to the present, too-clever-by-half volume and Hitchens is actually solicitous to the awful Paul Wolfowitz, the brains behind Donald Rumsfeld's march to war and one of the reigning architects of the Iraq invasion. The Iraqi and American blood on Wolfowitz's hands alone outdoes even Kissinger's culpability for the crimes of the Chilean junta, yet Hitchens gives him a pass for being among "those in the administration who were making the case for 'regime change' [and who] were sincere in what they believed."

What Wolfowitz was sincere in believing, Hitchens says by way of example, is that the United States made no claim to recolonize the Middle East either for itself or with surrogates. He believes

Wolfowitz bent no truths when he told Hitchens that "American sympathy for Israel did not extend to expansion or colonization." He doesn't doubt Wolfowitz's veracity after saying, in effect, (because these can only be Hitchens' paraphrasing) that "when the Turkish government was being more than usually obnoxious, and refusing the use of U.S. bases on Turkish soil for the deployment of a 'Northern Front,' unless Turkish troops were allowed into Iraqi Kurdistan, " Wolfowitz "was without ambivalence: Turkish boots on Iraqi soil would not be allowed. If the Turks insisted on exacting that price, the liberation of Iraq would go ahead without them (which it did)."

Now Kissinger is no serial murderer, as emotionally appropriate as is that thought. When I first read the review — and on Hitchens' recommendation read Isaacson, too — I was enchanted with the description. So much for enchantment. And we know that Wolfowitz is not now nor has he ever been a regime-changing democrat. Praise for Wolfowitz is of course misplaced, as a moment's reflection would show. But Hitchens' style won't allow for reflection; in fact, nothing he's ever written sticks in the mind, except the pleasure of his skewering common enemies.

What Hitchens is is a serial character assassin when it comes to enemies and an oleaginous flatterer of friends.

There's ample evidence for both in this memoir.

But what about style? Here Hitchens takes American journalists to task for writing as if their hands were webbed, and he would be right. What is memorable about Hitchens is exactly his felicity with language and his capacity for using humor in a humorless context as a delicate if sometimes imprecise weapon.

In a moving account of his mother, Yvonne, her hard years as the child of an abusive father, her anxiety about class compounded by her abandoning any shred of Jewish identity to marry a British officer, assimilate into the British lower-upper-middle class, efface herself with penury to assure that her sons had Oxbridge educations, and eventually flee Britain with a lover and soon after take her own life — the story itself takes up much of the book's early parts — it's hard to match his description of Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy." He relates it back to his mum, as being "the strictest verdict passed by a daughter on a male parent since the last reunion of the House of Atreus."

Or on a wintery visit with Jacek Kuron, the then-Polish Marxist and internationalist, and with other discouraged "veterans of the extremely nasty Polish Prison system" — this years before the rise of Solidarnosc, when the Stalinist regime was still unchallenged and in command — he describes these resisters as having

a faint nimbus of optimism, visible on the very edge of a dark and cold star. It was, to put it another way, quite astonishing to see how much, and to what extent, the party-state depended on lies. Small lies and big lies. Petty lies hardly worth telling, that would shame a nose-picking, whining, guilty child, and huge lies that would cause a hardened blackmailer and perjurer to blush a bit.

This is all quite vividly done. We can feel the boot of Stalinism on the human face and heart, even as his glorious description does nothing to help us understand the command system better. For poets and court jesters and novelists, feeling can be enough. It's an accomplishment to get that far. Hitchens, though, claims to be doing more. He fails.

His take on individuals and ideas is just as subjective, and just as poorly explained. He writes of how "Saddam had given warning of the approach of his Ceausescu moment: a crazy meltdown of

authority." He calls Islam in essence "a fanatical religion which makes absolutist claims for itself and promises to supply — even to be — a total solution to all problems, furthermore regards itself as so pure as to be above criticism." He pictures the Ayatollah Khomeini as "a black winged ghoul [who] came flapping back from exile on a French jet and imposed a version of his own dark and heavy uniform on a people too long used to being bullied and ordered around."

He knocks Bill Clinton for being slow to war with Serbia, when as he says "Muslim Bosnia was a site of daily slaughter by Christians," even as Hitchens and others were "trying to get Clinton to take some intelligibly vertebrate position on that," as though Clinton's (like Obama's) policy failings had anything to do with a lack of spine and not everything to do with national and even global economic interests.

He calls Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson "tethered gas balloons of greed and cynicism," — great stuff as catharsis or standup comedy but useless analytically.

Thumbing through any of his work, you find equally great language. Too often, though, it's the language that's in command. In his book on Tom Paine, he refers to arch Whig Edmund Burke's broadside at the French rebellion, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, as "one of the most sulfurous counter-revolutionary screeds of all time." Counter-revolutionary it was, more lucky that prescient and a bit thick, too, given that the Girondins and not the Jacobins were still its leaders, but "one of the most sulfurous?"

Even where he tries to make an analytical point, or cast a serious observation, as when he writes of Tom Wolfe, the southern fop who is said to have used Hitchens as his model for the weasely British writer and dandy in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, that "much of Wolfe's celebrated 'style' was part of a revival of a right-wing politics based on the defensive class-consciousness of the well-off." It's a wonderful line, but is it true?

MEANWHILE SOMEONE HE LIKES is described in Olympian terms as "glamorous and loquacious," a woman "whose career as a civil rights champion ... is barely to be equaled by any living person." The Polish Marxist-turned-nationalist Leszek Kolakowski is named a "national hero" and someone for whom Hitchens was "honored" with being invited to speak at a memorial meeting soon after his death. In another work, he names Conor Cruise O'Brien's *The Long Affair*, a decidedly Burkean demolition of Jefferson as a dangerous Rousseauian philosophe, as "the most eloquent of the anti-Jeffersonian nonfictions," which is like appreciating the style of Joseph de Maistre or Leo Strauss. I could add George Will, but he has no style, only affect.

His pals Martin Amis, Ian McEwan, and James Fenton are treated throughout as though they and he composed a quartet of oversexed lads in a beer commercial. There's even a homoerotic kiss-but-never-quite-tell rendering of Amis, while not one woman lover or dear female friend is named, even as he brags that he never had sex with any but beautiful women. His marriage is barely mentioned, though he acknowledges children.

And while he prides himself on his taste and capacity for "strong waters," he is contemptuous of any recreational drug use, including marijuana. Hitchens has more opinions than any three people have the right to maintain.

No one who has ever seen Hitchens in action should be surprised. Those around the Campaign for Peace and Democracy will remember an episode played out at a 1989 forum at New York's New School for Social Research marking the collapse of the old order and celebrating those heady days of upheaval in Eastern Europe. The evening gathering became so packed that safety considerations required restricting access and hiving off the overflow crowd. Hitchens, in his best Colonel Blimp

impression, hectored the crowd that the opponents of Stalinism in Europe wouldn't scurry from a political meeting merely because it was crowded. It was left to Congressman Barney Frank, the liberal Massachusetts Democrat and Hitchens' fellow speaker, to suggest that fire marshals shouldn't be confused with the repressive power of the state apparatus.

For some, the question on the table in *L'affair Hitchens* is why did this seemingly quintessential man of the left abandon positions he was synonymous with to join the State Department's charmed circle. For this reviewer, Hitchens was never a man of the left if the term means someone who employs a class analysis of history and politics. Yes, that is harsh, because even Marxism at its best is not a science, political positions are relative and anyone is free to follow R.H. Tawney's injunction that "we are all Marxists, you in your way and I in his." Still, there is a pale pink thread running through all of Hitchens' work, both in those older pieces that pass left muster and those that so dismally disappoint. It has to do with democracy and tolerance. Not a bad starting point, and certainly necessary but not sufficient. Absent an understanding of imperialism as a violent social order and not the product of bad manners by scrofulous people, it's no stretch to understand why quondam lefties would switch sides, especially if one side appears bloodthirsty and the other merely self-interested.

Plus, if we are honest, Hitchens was always more harlequin than hero.