The Hitch: an attempt at understanding
by Michael Weiss

What follows is not a review of Hitch-22 (see "Two-headed Hitchens" in the June 2010 issue of The New Criterion) or even a biographical sketch of its author, who has been chided in the press for writing a memoir that diminishes autobiography, is short on introspection and catharsis, and seems most at ease when name-dropping or mugging for posterity. For someone so obviously self-conscious, the consensus runs, Christopher Hitchens is quite parsimonious in giving a piece of himself. Even from laudatory reviews comes a mild clucking sound: It's all well and good that you’re chums with Martin, Salman and Ian, but you haven’t really put yourself on the couch or “opened up,” have you? Rather hostile to psychoanalysis for a self-described “orthodox Freudian,” aren’t we?

Not long after Hitch-22’s publication, a friend who’s quite sympathetic to Christopher and was preparing to interview him on one of the early legs of his book tour rang me up and said that he was having some difficulty taking the full measure of the man from these pages. One of the most widely quoted and dissected public intellectuals on the planet is also one of the most inscrutable. Did I have any special insights as a former student and current friend and colleague? I did my best to oblige and the ensuing conversation led me to record some of my observations.

"One of these days I’m going to be found out” is what James Cameron (the radical journalist, not the overrated filmmaker) evidently repeated to himself every day of his career. The true jigsaw puzzle of the Hitch may never be solved, but herewith I offer my own attempt at reconstruction.

An opposing man.

The phrase “equal opportunity offender” carries with it the implication of indiscriminateness, or curmudgeonliness for its own sake. But this is self-evidently not the case with Christopher who chooses his foils carefully and does not stop assailing them even after he’s risked becoming redundant or worse: boring. So what motivates his well-known hatred of enemies? Though he disclaims the nexus of the personal and the political, it does in fact play a minor role for that part of his corpus which has earned him the most celebrity (and notoriety).
Quite often the target of his invective has not just issued an assault on reason and decency in general but on Christopher in particular, or on those close to him, which amounts to the same thing. Like Nato, he interprets an attack on one to be an attack on all. “Friends are family to me,” he writes and means in Hitch-22. Don’t misunderstand me: he’d have still been very much against the Ayatollah Khomeini without a fatwah on Salman Rushdie, but he would not be as against him without it. How odd that accusations of “Islamophobia” or an atheism so “militant” it can only be seen as the inverse of evangelicalism were conspicuously absent when Christopher was still solidly on the Left and formulating sentences such as this one in 1989: “Yet Islam means surrender. The very word is like the echo of a forehead knocking repeatedly on the floor, while the buttocks are proffered to the empty, unfeeling sky in the most ancient gesture of submission and resignation.”

For all the noises his liberal critics have made about his supposed rightward drift, it is actually remarkable to consider how intellectually consistent Christopher has been throughout the decades. The tell-tale mark of the ideologue is the code of omerta he adopts when it comes to the failings of his own side. Yet Christopher has been almost ostentatious in his rejection of such an approach, skewering Bill Clinton as a cynical triangulator in The Nation and testifying before Congress in the president’s impeachment proceedings, costing him a friendship with Sidney Blumenthal; then obituarizing Ronald Reagan as one of the dimmest and nastiest men ever to hold the presidency well after striking up a friendship with Paul Wolfowitz and many other neoconservatives. (One sometimes detects a note of careerist envy in much of the scorn heaped upon Christopher for his perceived heresies and betrayals: it’s almost as if their complaint was over his ability to still make a living in the aftermath of so many burnt bridges.)

There’s another obstacle standing in the way of his smooth glide into the precincts of the intellectual Right. Despite his Daniel Deronda-like discovery of his own Jewishness, for which he provides a lengthy genealogical backstory, Christopher has never made his peace with the state of Israel and therefore will always be held in great suspicion by a goodly portion of the Commentary crowd. Many other neoconservatives have welcomed him to the fight while still upbraiding him for how long it took him to bid goodbye to all that. To understand what motivates Christopher’s independent-mindedness, one needs to know something about the radical milieu from which he emerged and still bears all the relevant scar tissue.

The International Socialists, which he joined in the late-1960s, was a Trotskyist group but Trotskyist in a deeply nostalgic fashion, being more the extenuation of a series of now-forgotten but then pivotal arguments that took place thirty years prior when Stalinism not so much an accomplished fact of history but a present danger to it. The so-called Left Opposition, which cohered in the Soviet Union in 1923 upon the publication of Trotsky’s pamphlet The New Course and was later internationalized in the post-exile follow-up volume The Revolution Betrayed, clearly distinguished the fault-line in post-Leninist Bolshevism as being between, on the one hand, internationalists and those who feared the
rise of a self-perpetuating class of Soviet bureaucrats and, on the other, isolationists and those who aspired to belong to such a class. Trotskyism was most valuable in rooting out the fallacies that undergirded the isolationist-bureaucratist wing of the Party, exposing the Big Lie at the heart of Stalinism and offering an in-house explanation for what powered this Frankenstein system’s internal engine. One might consider Trotskyism in this light a kind of pre-Cold War Kremlinology waged by former Kremlin officials (not by accident did the American brain-trust of the movement, from Max Shachtman to James Burnham to Irving Kristol, later became prominent Cold Warriors).

Although its adherents would never have conceded this point at the time, Trotskyism was fundamentally an intellectual strategy rather than a political one. It won the war of ideas but lost the war for the Central Committee. It drew on vast reserves of pre-revolutionary virtues, with courage and clearheadedness being primary among them. According to Robert Conquest, whose seminal work *The Great Terror* was not coincidentally assigned reading in the International Socialists:

In fact, courage and clearheadedness are admirable in themselves. And if they do not rank high among the moral virtues, we can see in some of the Soviet oppositionists something rather better. It is true that those who did not confess, and were shot secretly, demonstrated not merely a higher courage, but a better sense of values. In them, however touched by the demands of Party and revolutionary loyalty, loyalty to the truth and the idea of a more humane regime prevailed. But even among those who confessed, we can often see the struggle between Party habits and the old impulses to justice which had originally, in many cases at least, been one of the motives for joining the Party.

With the advent of the New Left in the 1960s, Trotskyism was taken up, to varying degrees of seriousness and kitsch, as a banner of permanent opposition rather than permanent revolution. For the *soixante-huitard* disciples of the International Socialists, it represented a sophisticated and battle-hardened pedigree by which to simultaneously reject the polarities of Washington and Moscow and seek an “alternative” form of democratic socialism. And if that alternative proved elusive, then at least an enlightened rebelliousness and critical disposition were part of the tool kit, which is why these disciples questioned authority and “broke” with the movement with greater ease than those of other self-styled Trotskyist sects (one thinks of Gerry Healy’s morbid cult in England, which managed to ensnare all the talent of the Redgrave family).

So with such a heterodox training, Christopher could take himself to Havana, see the contradiction between “spontaneous” popular opinion and the Castroite catechism, insult some low-level commissar, and come away thoroughly disenchanted with the Cuban Revolution. He could also glimpse and encourage seedlings of revolt in the nations of the Warsaw Pact, which eventually blossomed into full-scale gardens of resistance led by both a genuine proletariat, as in Poland, and by cultural revivalists with a fondness for Western cinema and rock music, as in Czechoslovakia.
Yet even the best Trotskyist lens has got a cataract built right into it, which is to say that it often mistakes a tolerance of ethnic minorities and a sloganeered secularism and internationalism for the code signs of a worthy cause. Christopher made a major misjudgment in Mesopotamia in the 1970s, later discovering--and ferociously arguing--that in fact the Ba’ath Party of Iraq led by one Saddam Hussein was closer to an experiment in Arab National Socialism than anything else. He does his best in Hitch-22 to contextualize his early engagement with a latter-day foe as wrongheaded but for the right reasons (again, little has changed: the Kurds were the ethnic minority that looked as if it was going to thrive in Ba’aathist Iraq), citing Keynes’ maxim that when facts change so should opinions. But Saddamism displayed its core rottenness years before the First Gulf War, which Christopher opposed out of a sense of anti-imperialism: “It had not occurred to me at the time, or not with full awareness, that if Saddam Hussein could have been so crazy as to go for broke, and to steal all of Kuwait when he could have had a lucrative chunk of it for the asking, why then he might be such a deranged megalomaniac that he could no longer discern even his own interests.”

This does count as self-criticism even if a thief is the least likely person to “go for broke” (a rare cliche that must have escaped Martin’s razor at the manuscript level). But the point of this episode as a political miscalculation is that it was to be a fellow Trotskyist named Kanan Makiya who would persuade Christopher and much of the world of just how fundamentally reactionary Ba’athism was and how psychopathic its generalissimus. Not exactly a defeat for the epigones of Lev Davidovitch and just the sort of historical irony that causes those thistles of unconventional radicalism to cling to one’s garb for a spell longer.

Indeed, one of the legacies of Trotskyism is its ability to turn its own temporal defeats into moral victories, a source for much of its romanticization by the intelligentsia, from Arthur Koestler to George Steiner to the Partisan Review masthead, whose reigning Gentile priestess Mary McCarthy gave her own anatomy of the movement’s dogged opposition in her classic essay about the Moscow Show Trials, “My Confession.” Depending upon which tributary of this Volga of defiance one swam in, an at-odds mentality toward politics and culture was more or less pronounced. It was telling that the person who recruited Christopher to the International Socialists was Peter Sedgwick, later the elegant flame-tender of Victor Serge, the Russo-Belgian anarchist who helped the Bolsheviks seize power in 1917, then win the Russian Civil War against the fascistic Whites, before turning entirely against what he memorably called the “psychosis of absolute power” that soon overtook the new masters of the Kremlin. Serge devoted the remainder of his life to combating that psychosis in his novels, essays and poems, all of which Christopher has at one point or another consumed and memorialized in print. And although Serge had his own falling out with the Old Man, despite finding the same exile’s respite in Cardenas’ Mexico, he offered the best description I know of Trotsky’s main debilitation as a leader, which also happens to be the foremost recommendation of his ghost to certain stubborn personalities:
I do not know if there were any formal deliberations on this subject among the leaders of the Left Opposition, but I do know that the question was discussed (end of 1925, beginning of 1926) and it was then that Trotsky deliberately refused power, out of respect for an unwritten law that forbade any recourse to military mutiny within a Socialist regime; for it was all too likely that power won in this way, even with the noblest intentions, would eventually finish in a military and police dictatorship, which was anti-Socialist by definition… Rarely has it been made more sharply obvious that the end, far from justifying the means, commands it own means, and that for the establishment of a Socialist democracy the old means of armed violence are inappropriate.

Such is the fortitude of the Cassandra, happier in noble defeat than in ignominious victory. Here, I would argue, you have the germ of Christopher’s limitlessly fought campaigns, from the bail-outs of Bosnia and Kosov to the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, combined with his unwillingness to sacrifice certain ethical precepts to them. If prohibitions on warrantless wiretapping, torture and censorship of the media constitute handicaps to the struggle against Al Qaeda and Islamofascism, then these are handicaps that must be borne.

A final note on Serge. As it happens, those lines about Trotsky are taken from his *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, which I’m sure was one of several hovering archetypes for Christopher’s composition of *Hitch-22*. It certainly was for Dwight Macdonald when it came time to write his look back in hangdog radicalism. So fired was the great journalist by Serge’s in-between-ist positioning during one of the seismic events of modern history and impressed by his unstinting generosity for former comrades that he wound up titling his own *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* and only later experienced acute embarrassment at the implied comparison between a New York intellectual and an internationally hounded and imprisoned barricade combatant. Tragedy, as so often happens in Marxist circles, is run through the anxiety of influence and comes out looking like farce.

Christopher very much resembles Macdonald as a literary journalist and polemicist: ill-at-ease in any “camp,” slyly attuned to his own reputation and the figure he cuts at salons and cocktail parties, and yet absolutely principled and hardheaded in his opinions. Both men began their political journeys seeking an honorable tradition that they might renovate for application to contemporary crises. Is it mere coincidence that both once idolized an energetic and brilliant cadre of doomed Russians, then, when these gods failed, turned for sustenance to the Founding Fathers of the United States?

**Parentage and parenthood.**

If *Hitch-22* contains a poignant section, then it must be Christopher’s moving portrait of his mother Yvonne, a woman clearly too good for her middle-class station and yet too self-sacrificing to have been born into any other:
What she wanted was the metropolis, with cocktail parties and theater trips and smart friends and witty conversations, such as she had once had as a young thing in prewar Liverpool, where she’d lived near Penny Lane and briefly known people like the madly gay Frank Hauser, later director of the Oxford Playhouse, and been introduced by a boyfriend to the work of the handsome Ulster poet Louise MacNeice, a contemporary of Auden and author of *Autumn Journal* and (her favorite) *The Earth Compels*.

What she got was a failed clothing boutique, a domestic economy devoted to sending her children to public school and an austere and joyless husband, Eric Hitchens, known filially as “The Commander” because of his valiant service in Her Majesty’s Royal Navy during World War II. Her premature decease took the form of a double-suicide with her lover in Athens: it was out of the fatal hotel room, to which Christopher was called to identify her body, that he first glimpsed the Acropolis. He hung around to file dispatches for *The New Statesman* on the right-wing junta then ruling Greece--either the first stage of grief for a devastated son or the last resort for a foreign correspondent quick to notice that his mother’s coroner had been an accomplice to state-perpetrated political murders.

Yvonne was “the exotic and the sunlit when I could easily have had a boyhood of stern and dutiful English gray” and her imprint was large and lasting, possibly even more so than the author realizes. Where her thwarted aspirations for a life of bohemian chic became reality for others you’ll have found Christopher rhapsodizing about the feminine ideal. He likes his women witty and beguiling (don’t we all) but with an added Wavian flourish that’s a hard trick to master unless one is to the manner born. Reading these reflections on what might have been for an obviously mirthful and curious woman, I couldn’t help but think that Christopher’s longtime admiration for Jessica Mitford was a mite “overdetermined.”

“Decca” was an endlessly entertaining English aristocrat with a talent for disappointing filial expectations in the grandest fashion. A one-time niece-in-law to Churchill, she later married a Jew, moved to the West Coast -- where, unlike Yvonne, she stayed immune to the lures of New Age philosophy -- and penned a wildly satirical look at the American funeral industry, lending a social scientific cast to one of the darker comic themes of Waugh’s *The Loved One*. Mitford was also a radical through and through. When asked during her naturalization why she was choosing to become a citizen of the United States, an ordeal that Christopher recounts himself undergoing recently with a mixture of patriotic pride and nightmarish bureaucratic wrangling, it was only at the last moment that she declined to say that the Communist Party of the USA wouldn’t allow her membership otherwise. Who says women aren’t funny?

As for the Commander:

I had once thought that he’d helped me understand the Tory mentality, all the better to combat and repudiate it. And in that respect he was greatly if accidentally instructive. But over the
longer stretch, I have come to realize that he taught me--without ever intending to--what it is to feel disappointed and betrayed by your “own” side. He had a certain idea of England, insular to a degree, and conservative for sure but not always, or not necessarily, reactionary. In this England, patient merit would take precedence over the insolence of office, and people who earned their money would be accorded more respect than people who had merely had it or “made” it. The antiquity and tranquility of the landscape and the coastline would likewise have earned their share of deference: whose who wanted to uproot or to “develop” an area would have to make a case for change rather than be permitted the glib and clever assumption that change was a good thing in itself.

This is a very handsome paragraph and contains a great deal of insight into postwar England, of which there has seldom been a more comprehending or sensitive chronicler. It also lends a great deal of relevance to what I hold as Christopher’s finest literary essay, a muscular and sober defense of Philip Larkin, which he wrote for *New Left Review* after the great poet, who’d been dead nearly a decade already, was subjected to a torrent of posthumous abuse for the casual bigotry, misogyny and scatological, boyo humor on display in his Selected Letters and Andrew Motion’s biography--all of the vices, in other words, that were least expressed in his creative oeuvre (the title of Christopher’s essay, taken from a letter Larkin wrote to Julian Barnes about his first encounter with Margaret Thatcher, was “Something About the Poems.”).

So far from being ‘quintessentially English,’ Larkin was a wry and melancholy observer of postwar English anxieties and insecurities. Resentful of how his generation had been made to foot a historic bill that in low moments could seem unworthy of the cost (though he didn’t fight in World War II), wary of the entitlement and decadence that had come to define that generation’s offspring (not that he had any kids himself), Larkin was at least disciplined in his resentment and wariness where it mattered most. His poems were ironic and wistful and in places surprisingly heartfelt. Larkin was the eulogist for a bygone England, one that had been paved over and abandoned to ‘bleak high-risers’, M1 cafes, parking lots and ‘concrete and tyres’. How curmudgeonly could a man be who apostrophized the native rabbit population, which had been cruelly reduced by means of a manmade virus called Myxomatosis: ‘I’m glad I can’t explain / Just in what jaws you were to suppurate.’?

Larkin was possessed of an uncommon self-awareness that preempted even the harshest animadversions leveled against him by a smug literary commissariat after he was long gone. To uncover his supposed nastiness--the mental barks and growls--they had to rummage through his correspondence, his diary. Christopher’s plaint was that the poet demanded a proper historical study, not self-righteous condemnation. It fell to the lot of the Left to see Larkin as emblematic of a little-investigated substratum of English sociology. E.P. Thompson gave us the *Making of the English Working Class; The Making of the English Petty Bourgeoisie* was still forthcoming. The failure to comprehend the fundamental seriousness behind the Larkinesque generational posture is what ultimately caused that Left to experience cataclysmic shifts -- the Falklands War and the rise of
Thatcher -- as bewildering shocks. A true student of Orwell, Christopher was never so cosmopolitan as to miss the idiosyncrasies and discreet charms of his own native land.

The “and that will be England gone” Tory provincial is perfectly caught in an anecdote Christopher relays about his father, who was once asked by a superior to co-host a party for naval officers that hadn’t been invited to the livelier dos because they were all bores. The Commander’s withering and self-abnegating reply, which nearly brought Christopher to tears, was: “I believe I have already received my invitation, sir.” Something toad-like squatted in him, too.

It strikes me as distinctly odd that so many reviewers of Hitch-22 have claimed that this is a memoir devoid of any real feeling or emotional depth. True, there is a near-total absence of Christopher’s wives and children (two and three, respectively), with most of the love sonnets being written for famous contemporaries. As far as the domestic situation goes, what we get instead is a bit of self-reproach from an inattentive or absentee father -- parenthood being the least recommended course of action for a man who takes boredom to be a source of perspiring fear. Why do diapers, soccer matches and ballet recitals when you can dodge nail-bombs in Belfast and read lines of Kipling to Borges in Buenos Aires?

By his own estimation, Christopher spent the early part of fatherhood waiting around for his children to become interesting. A true Paineite democrat, he opposes all forms of hereditary succession and is leery of “heirs” to anything, including himself. Solidarity, courage and cleverness are earned qualities that subsume mere legacy. However, this imbalance has happily corrected itself, too, over time. A note of authentic pride is registered when Christopher’s son Alexander, who lives in London and is rightly considered here an expert on Islamic extremism, suggests that the two of them embark beyond the pacified confines of the Green Zone and travel to chaotic Baghdad during a pre-surge tour of Iraq. A few weeks ago I saw Christopher engage with Alex on a professional level and only will remark that redemption for absentee fatherhood has taken exactly the right form: Not only are Hitch’s children profoundly interesting to him, but he is to them.

The knight’s move.

All of Christopher’s criticism proceeds from the premise that there is an occluded irony or paradox to every novelist or poet worth knowing about and that, once excavated, that irony or paradox will not only illuminate the body of work but also help explain why it’s been so strangely misconstrued by everyone else. The process is one of reconciliation of the yin of a writer’s politics with the yang of his creative output. Much as the dire straightjacket of political correctness has fettered this tradition in recent decades, it was actually the Left that most specialized in it. In Literature and Revolution, Trotsky noted of the Futurist Marxist poet Vladimir Mayakovsy that he was at his best as a poet exactly where he was at his worst as a Marxist. The Partisan Review gang, which turned this jujitsu style of critical inquiry into a high-minded metier, was famous for making an anti-Semitic royalist like T.S. Eliot both
intelligible and relevant to Jewish socialists.

Notwithstanding his own disdain for the author of “The Waste Land,” Christopher has similarly made a career out of muddling the spectrum and re-evaluating commonplace assumptions that adhere to both sides of it -- a practice he often calls the knight’s move of literary journalism. And it moves in two different directions, from left to right and from right to left. Christopher is as adept at mining a quotient of radicalism out of presumptive reactionaries as he is at exposing progressives for the core parsimony of sentiment or intellect that undergirds their reputations. Thus, P.G. Wodehouse may have been a sexless man-child besotted with the Edwardian idyll but he was also a masterful anatomist of the English class system, champion of the lower orders and underrated lampooner of fascism. Rudyard Kipling was less a jingoistic champion of Empire than its most skilled elegist and curator. Patrick O’Brian’s Master and Commander series was not just a thrilling John Bull adventure tale set to the background of the Napoleonic Wars but also a curtain-raiser on Darwinian scientific modernity. Larkin was, as discussed, transcendent of his stature as the laureate of fish-grey, monkey-brown Blimpery. Meanwhile, Graham Greene was more influenced by the guilt complex of his adopted Catholicism than by the subversive promise of his communism. (Ditto Terry Eagleton.) Mother Teresa was no humanitarian at all, much less a saint, but rather a Balkan banshee of sanctimony and exploiter of Third World poverty. Isaiah Berlin was a charmer and a skilled judge of character but he was also a liberal hypocrite who cozied up to power, facilitated the Vietnam War and did nothing for modern philosophy except dine out on a lifelong misunderstanding of Marxism.

A third, minor category of knight’s move criticism involves highlighting a justly celebrated literary or historical figure’s debilitations which he then managed to surmount. The objective here is to unconventionally reaffirm a piece of conventional wisdom. So: George Orwell’s most admirable political triumph was the one over his own innate conservatism; Winston Churchill’s heroic grandeur persisted in spite of so much revisionist history which showed him to have been a wartime fraud, an adventurist and the inventor-in-chief of his own trans-Atlantic legend. For all his camp drollery and sexual intrigue, Oscar Wilde was, in principle, a very serious Victorian socialist.

Depending upon one’s taste, this mode of intellection indicates either a dazzling mind that can only think at 45-degree angles or a fetishist of counterintuition, in which case Christopher’s weekly perch at Slate magazine seems foreordained.

Such, such were the joys.
The current publishing season has seen fit to bestow on us two volumes with Christopher featured as a prominent character. In his most recent novel, *The Pregnant Widow*, Martin Amis has turned his best friend into his alter ego’s foster brother, the reader’s introduction to whom takes the following form: “As a pupil for many years in a British boarding school, Nicholas had naturally had his gay period. But there was a political will in Nicholas now; what politicians, at least, called steel.”

Christopher has been exceedingly candid over the years about this aspect of his biography, now the cause for much tabloid ink in the British press because it involved his bedding of two of Thatcher’s future (male) staffers. In the memoir, this promiscuous heteroflexibility is treated in a slightly gorgeous fashion: “But I was in search of love in those days, and I went full of curiosity and the faint, unrecognised apprehension that here, at last, I should find that low door in the wall, which others, I knew, had found before me, which opened on an enclosed and enchanted garden, which was somewhere, not overlooked by any windows, in the heart of that grey city.”

OK, that’s *Brideshead Revisited*. Though there is no more striking reference point in these chapters, which take us from The Leys grammar school at Cambridge to Balliol College at Oxford, awash as they are with nostalgia for dreaming spires and ganymede indulgences. One might easily mistake our hero for Charles Ryder were it not for three pronounced differences. The first is that Christopher was just as comfortable being tossed into the clink for antiwar or civil rights agitation as he was being feted at swish dinners by the waistcoated element on campus who found his company charming in spite of his politics. The second is that in his youth he evidently had, then lost, a nervous stammer, the tell-tale Freudian tic worked up into lavish affectation by Anthony Blanche in Waugh’s lush *bildungsroman* (and it will have been Young Master Hitchens, if anyone at all, declaiming Eliot through a megaphone from a dormitory window). The third is that Christopher has not yet converted to Roman Catholicism at someone else’s deathbed. That contingency is a remote one.

But there certainly is a welter of “literature” on British public school reminiscences and, whether by accident or design, life has done an admirable job of imitating art here. To begin with, forbidden love first presents itself as a rescuing friendship, with due allowances made for the metaphysical:

This duality in the life and mind of The Leys was beautifully captured for me by an incident in my first year. I was cornered in some chilly recreation room by a would-be bully named E.A.M. Smith, a brainless and cruel lad a year or so my senior. This tough and tasty dunce excelled at games and was a member of a highly exclusive Christian crackpot sect named the Glanton Brethren, which in its own disordered mind constituted an elect of god’s anointed. “Hitchens is being gassy,” he said, using the school’s argot for people like me who talked too much. “The cure for being gassy is a bit of a beating.” I wasn’t completely sure that he couldn’t deliver on this threat, and the uncertainty must have shown on my features because suddenly a voice cut in: “Oh, please, don’t give a damn about Smith.” The moron’s grin began to fade and the few
who would probably have sided with him lost interest at once. My rescuer was a tall, thin boy with a certain presence to him. Who was this chap, who could make a muscular thug shrivel? His name, it turned out, was Michael Prest. He was in the next “house” to me but was a home boarder because his father was an economics don at Jesus College. I recognized him without knowing his name because every morning in chapel, when the rest of us bent forward at the call to pray, he remained sitting up and unbowed. There was nothing the prefects and teachers could do about this: the law said we had to be in chapel every day but they couldn’t force us to pray on top of that, or even compel us to pretend to do so. I admired this stand without emulating it. Within a few days I had made a new and fast friend and then one morning, as everyone else but Michael crashed lazily forward in their pews, I took a deep breath and held myself upright. It felt very lonely for a moment but soon there was nothing to it. I started bringing books to read during the sermons and the prayers, in order to improve the shining hour. R.H. Tawney on *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* was, I remember, an early choice.

Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. You’ll have guessed what happens with Prest from this leading introduction, which neatly touches upon the twin pillars of a notorious education system -- homoeroticism and sadomasochism -- that were previously mapped by two of its most distinguished graduates, Cyril Connolly and George Orwell, also self-conscious referents for the author of the present volume.

Connolly and Orwell were, in fact, classmates at St. Cyprian’s in East Sussex and then a year removed from each other at Eton, that easy-bake oven of the upper crust and -- as the British rags also cyclically like to remind us -- alma mater of the current Tory prime minister and the current Tory mayor of London. Both writers bathed their educations in great retrospective importance, presenting the privileged circuit of cruelty, repression and corporal punishment as key to understanding Britain’s ruling class--and in some cases, European tyrants. In his excellent book on Orwell, Christopher credits the author of *1984* with drawing from these formative experiences all of the relevant insights one would need to know about a totalitarian country without ever having traveled to one. (What price an audience with Stalin’s Red Court when one could be daily terrorized by Mrs. Wilkes, the Headmaster’s wife at St. Cyprian’s?) For Connolly, the lasting effects of a public school education were couched as adult sensitivities and maladjustments. In his autobiography, *Enemies of Promise*, he observes: “Were I to deduce any system from my feelings on leaving Eton, it might be called The Theory of Permanent Adolescence. It is the theory that the experiences undergone by boys at the great public schools, their glories and disappointments, are so intense as to dominate their lives and to arrest their development. From these it results that the greater part of the ruling class remains adolescent, school-minded, self-conscious, cowardly, sentimental, and in the last analysis homosexual.”

Cowardice and sentimentality never had a fighting chance with Christopher, the homosexuality was fleeting, and only the world-play and dirty limerick invention with Martin -- much reconstituted in
this memoir and derided as sophomoric by mainly female critics -- rank in terms of any lingering symptoms of arrested development. But “bawdy,” as it was loftily known to the genius syndicate of Kingsley Amis, Philip Larkin and Robert Conquest, is harder than it looks and requires some technical and linguistic versatility. For example,

When Gaugin was visiting Figi
He remarked, ‘Things are different here, e.g.,
While Tahitian skin calls for tan spread on thin,
You can splotch it on here with a squeegee.’

Or:

There was a lockmaker of Lyme,
Whose balls had a very sweet chime,
And when he set his cock
For seven o’clock,
It always got up dead on time.

If this be the verse, then in some sense every major English poet of the last century was a permanent adolescent. (The person responsible for the above selections helped bring down the humorless Soviet Union.) Auden, who exhibited all of the symptoms of Connolly's diagnosed condition, favorably reviewed *Enemies of Promise* for *The New Republic* when it appeared in 1938, and it’s perhaps worth noting that his reliquary of doggerel wound up in the hands of Tom Driberg, another public schoolboy and legendary queen whom Christopher once put in touch with Kingsley, then editing the *Oxford English Book of Light Verse* and in need of good material. The meeting that resulted -- which included the company of Christopher and Martin -- is somewhat addressed in *Hitch-22* but more hilariously recounted in Kingsley’s own famously unreliable *Memoirs*. At all events, the following contribution from the author of “Lay your sleeping head, my love” did not make the cut for the consequent anthology, although it no doubt proved useful to Christopher whilst touring Baghdad in the 70’s with an especially camp gay minder for the Ba’ath Party:

The Anglican dean of Hong Kong
Had a prick that was nine inches long;
He thought that the waiters
Were admiring his gaiters
When he went to the loo.
He was wrong.

There is a slightly performative aspect to Christopher’s recollections of sexual subversiveness, almost as if the permanent adolescent can only be judged in hindsight to have been parent to the political animal that later developed. The ensuing affair with Prest, for instance, is more redolent of platonic
camaraderie -- Christopher’s first male crush stood up for him, then stood with him on public platforms -- than it is of scandalized experimentation. A later same-sex affair resulted in his temporary suspension from The Leys, though this is told matter-of-factly. The madeleine effect Christopher seems to be aiming for here is the enormous titillation of posterity: “If you are going to sleep with Thatcher’s future ministers and toy with a future president’s lesbian girlfriend, in other words, you will not be able to savor it fully at the time and will have to content yourself with recollecting it in some kind of tranquility.”

I intend no disrespect when I say that the true object of Christopher’s affection, and the wellspring of his nostalgia, is the surplus value of experience. His favorite Jamesian admonition is, “Live all you can; it’s a mistake not to,” which he’d be the first to tell you contains oceans of recondite self-denial coming from the virginal author of The Ambassadors. One never can know what ordeal or dust-up or test-drive might later prove useful for a Washington cocktail party or Hay-on-Wye Festival. Or, for that matter, the learned literary essay. Stolen handjobs on the quadrangles may not be the necessary preconditions for writing knowingly about Proust, Wilde, Saki, Auden, Waugh, Maugham and Vidal, but for the Hitch, they seemed to have done the trick.

Another well-exercised and borrowed mantra is, “Try everything once except incest and Scottish dancing.” That which cannot be intuited or theorized must be discovered at first-hand, so to speak. Even as a Marxist hung up on “teleological hubris,” Christopher held old-fashioned English empiricism and go-see-for-yourself-ism in high forensic esteem; as a journalist he’d have been ill-served without it. It also explains why he boasts of having been the only foreign correspondent to travel to all three Axis of Evil countries and of having been waterboarded for the lurid enjoyment of Vanity Fair’s readership. The epigram that adorns Hitch-22 -- Caute, or “cautiously,” taken from Spinoza’s signet ring -- is therefore the most disingenuous word in the book. Christopher has never done anything cautiously.

The double agent.

Connolly’s analysis was published, and the raw data for it compiled, decades before Britain’s postwar reforms opened the public school system and Oxbridge academy to increasing numbers of middle-class students. What became known as the scholarship-or-nothing fork in the education system was part of a general cultural upheaval in the Fifties (whose attendant lowering of academic standards was well-satirized in Lucky Jim) and reached vertiginous degrees with the onset of “The Sixties.” So how might Connolly’s theory be updated to take into account these demographic changes?

What would be the definitional imprint of the bright young thing with radical leanings who is admitted into this idyll of depravity and elitism but never allowed to forget the fact that he doesn’t truly belong there? Well, he’ll have had the unnatural advantage of seeing future statesmen, captains of industry and cultural celebrities in their larval stages of brilliance or absurdity, making him
accustomed to the various “types” that he’ll encounter when it comes time to assess who’s running the country. His own tincture of privilege will have instilled a confidence in him uncommon to the Left-wing defender of the underdog, whose outsider status can breed anxiety or insecurity that often transforms into a full-blown personality disorder. Such a person, in other words, may very well feel like a bit of a traitor or double agent to his own life, a sensibility that Christopher clearly discerns in himself and that furnishes both the title and leitmotif of Hitch-22.

“The most intense wars are civil wars,” he writes, “just as the most vivid and rending personal conflicts are internal ones, and what I hope to do now is give some idea of what it is like to fight on two fronts at once, to try and keep opposing ideas alive in the same mind, even occasionally to show two faces at the same time.” This penchant for having it both ways, or keeping two sets of accounts, may seem a pose to Christopher’s more literal-minded and humorless detractors, but I assure you it is not. He persists in the belief -- very English and very Oxbridge -- that a debate has not been won until the opposing view has been stated at its highest. The most generous compliment he can pay to Koestler is to indicate how Darkness at Noon actually turned some people into Communists for precisely this reason.

But double book-keeping can sometimes prove exhausting, both for the accountant as well as the customer. A few summers ago, I heard Christopher argue vigorously in favor of the execution of Saddam Hussein. He stated his case methodically and as not being in direct contravention of his opposition to capital punishment but rather a continuation of the Iraq war policy. The Republic of Fear would never even begin to recover psychologically until its architect was destroyed, putting his victims in no doubt as to his possible return. But what of the Kurdish position against Saddam’s murder founded on socialist principle and opposed to petty revenge-taking or political expediency? Or your hero Jefferson’s opposition to the beheading of Marie Antoinette? Admirable but not persuasive in light of how dire post-Saddam Iraq had shown itself to be; not least of what was demanded (and this was before the “surge”) was a symbolic severance with totalitarian past. The fitting historic analogy was with the execution of Czar Nicholas II and his family at Ekaterinberg, which the Bolsheviks knew in the midst of the Russian Civil War would mark the point of no return for the October Revolution. He argued all this as though completely committed to it in principle. Then, a month or so later, there appeared in Slate his piece... against the execution of Saddam for the very reasons he’d found wanting earlier. He’d weighed both sides of the matter equally before arriving at the more morally satisfying. Whatever this is, it is not the style of a pot-shot polemicist.

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