

**CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS, SALMAN RUSHDIE AND EDWARD SAID:  
A TANGLED TRIAD**

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The year 2010 saw the publication of Christopher Hitchens' eagerly-awaited autobiography, *Hitch-22* (London: Atlantic, 435 pp, ISBN 978-184354-921-5). Its author's multiple interests and chequered political history are such that it is not my intention here to give the book a full review: others are far more qualified than I am to do so. What I will do in this brief piece is offer some comments on two of the chapters on which I do feel my opinion is valid, namely those on Hitchens' professional and personal relations with two other distinguished intellectuals of our time, Salman Rushdie and the late Edward Said.

It is impossible to write about Hitchens and avoid the controversial. At the same time, the universal sympathy which he has received, even from his detractors, in his present battle with cancer comes as a welcome reminder that in order to respect someone, one does not have to agree with them about absolutely everything.

The tangled triad that is Hitchens-Rushdie-Said consists of three major intellectuals – two essayists (Said being an academic and Hitchens not) and a novelist who is also an essayist – all writing in English, though only one (Hitchens) is a native speaker, all in some way hybrid in national and ethnic terms and all nonetheless received into the US's Ellis Island melting-pot (Said a Christian Palestinian become a Columbia lecturer, Rushdie a British national of Indo-Pakistani origins morphed into a US resident, and Hitchens a Briton deracinated to New York and turned binational).

All the triad knew each other, all had literature and politics in common at the top of their interests, and all three began their intellectual-political trajectories very decidedly on the left. However, Said at no point shifted his position on the political spectrum, whereas both Rushdie and Hitchens have, rightly or wrongly, been accused by many in recent times of mutating from left progressives into mainstream liberals, if not indeed neo-cons. Rushdie may not have explicitly concurred with his detractors' charges of abandoning the left, but Hitchens, as is clear from the new book, does go that far. Meanwhile, neither would agree that their political or intellectual judgment has been vitiated by any ideological metamorphosis, and both would no doubt consider themselves as qualified as ever to sup at the table of the great and good with the shade of Edward Said.

Christopher Hitchens' chapter on Rushdie, 'Salman' (261-280) is, inevitably, taken up mostly with the 'Rushdie affair', i.e. the controversy around *The Satanic Verses* and Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa. Hitchens does not invoke the affair as such as a cause of his breach with the left (that honour, or otherwise, falls to the Iraq war), but his defence of Enlightenment values and his harsh critique of the anti-Rushdie faction clearly run parallel with his divergence with large sectors of left-wing opinion on more strictly political matters. The defence of Rushdie in this book is made on similar secularist lines to those earlier staked out by Hitchens in his anti-religious treatise *God Is Not Great* (2007). He excoriates those on the Western left like Germaine Greer and John Berger, as well as fellow writers like Arthur Miller, who failed to uphold Rushdie's right to publish or to condemn religious censorship, and promotes his friend as an exemplar of free speech and his novel as a test case. The parallel attacks on Rushdie from the right might, at the time, have appeared predictable: those on the left were (then) less so - and indicative of things to come. For Hitchens, by writing *The*

*Satanic Verses* Rushdie ‘ignited one of the greatest-ever confrontations between the ironic and the literal mind’. The phrase ‘the literal mind’ clearly includes both Rushdie’s Muslim foes and his censorious opponents in the West. Implicitly, Hitchens demarcates himself from those who have opined on the issue without having read the novel and speaks *en connaissance de cause*: he praises Rushdie for undertaking the confrontation ‘with care and measure and scruple’ in his writing (267), also making it clear that – again unlike many self-appointed pundits – he is also familiar with Rushdie’s other books, both pre- and post-fatwa (*Midnight’s Children* and *Shame* – 264, but also *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* – 279n).

Hitchens relates how, when asked by the *Washington Post* on that fatal St Valentine’s Day in 1989 to state his position on the matter, he unequivocally leapt to his friend’s defence: ‘I felt at once that here was something that completely committed me’, a cause aligning ‘literature, irony, humour, the individual, and the defence of free expression’ against ‘dictatorship, religion, stupidity, demagoguery, censorship, bullying and intimidation’: ‘no more root-and-branch challenge to the values of the Enlightenment ... or to the First Amendment to the [US] Constitution, could be imagined’ (268). He supported the likes of Susan Sontag who publicly defended free speech against theocracy, while intuiting the emergence in the anti-Rushdie relativist camp of a species of ‘postmodern « Left », somehow in league with political Islam’, which was ‘something new, if not exactly New Left’ (270). Then as now, we find Christopher Hitchens saying no to today’s frequent *bien-pensant* conflation of religion and race, the ‘wilful, crass confusion between religious faith, which is voluntary, and ethnicity, which is not’ (269).

More than twenty years on, *The Satanic Verses* has not been banned in the US or in any European country but Turkey. To this extent, Hitchens should consider himself and Rushdie vindicated. However, he doubts whether the novel could be published today (‘nobody in the Anglo-American publishing business would now commission or print *The Satanic Verses*’ – 280): the implicit alignment of sections of the Western left with militant Islam, he argues, generated ‘a hinting undercurrent of menace and implied moral and racial blackmail that has never since been dispelled’ (270). Hitchens displays consistency in extending his defence of Rushdie to others who have found themselves on the wrong side of Islam, from the Danish cartoonists to Ayaan Hirsi Ali and the murdered Theo van Gogh, and also notes, correctly, that Rushdie ‘has become one of the most reliable defenders of the free expression of others’ (280). He is not sanguine about the prospects for untrammelled freedom of the imagination in ‘the world in which we all, to a greater or lesser extent, live now ... a world in which a fanatical religion, which makes absolute claims for itself ... regards itself as so pure as to be above criticism’ (277); and he laments what he sees as a hegemonic ‘moral relativism ... whereby the Enlightenment has been redefined as « white » and oppressive’ (280).

Hitchens’ account of the *Satanic Verses* saga includes a little-known but significant detail, which also has the virtue of connecting the subject to Edward Said. It emerges that Rushdie actually sent Said the typescript of his novel with the request : « Dear Edward, I’d be obliged to have your view on this » (267), and that Hitchens knew of this directly from Said. In other words, the controversial novel was validated before it appeared by the author of *Orientalism* – a point which its hostile critics on the left might care to note. What Hitchens does not mention, however, is Said’s subsequent eloquent defence of *The Satanic Verses*, published in 1994 in a collective volume of pro-Rushdie writings by Arab and Muslim intellectuals, in which he went so far as to call Rushdie ‘the intifada of the imagination’.

This brings us to Hitchens' chapter on Said, 'Edward Said in Light and Shade' (385-404), which charts a relationship more chequered in its course than that with Rushdie, but nonetheless, as our author affirms, 'a friendship that taught me a very great deal' (385). Hitchens considers Said as both political commentator and postcolonial literary scholar. Sceptical of such currents as deconstruction and postmodernism, Hitchens nonetheless praises Said the critic as someone genuinely committed to literature : « when Edward talked about English literature and quoted from it, he passed the test that I always privately apply: Do you truly *love* this subject ... ? » (385-86). He notes « Edward's pronounced dislike of George Orwell », surely a potential bone of contention in the light of Hitchens' own major reflection on the subject, *Why Orwell Matters* (2002) (a book which for some reason he scarcely mentions in *Hitch-22*). He praises *Orientalism*, if a shade grudgingly, as a 'book which made one think', while heretically pointing out Said's failure to consider the reverse Orientalism or Occidentalism of a phenomenon like the Ottoman Empire (390), and rather ambivalently recalling his own (in fact measured and informed) review in the *Atlantic Monthly* of the book's reissue in 2003 (397; [www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2003/09/where-the-twain-should-have-met/2779/](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2003/09/where-the-twain-should-have-met/2779/) ). He does not, however, mention Said's later opus *Culture and Imperialism*, whose 'contrapuntal' readings of the likes of Conrad and Kipling surely help correct the reductivist tendency visible in *Orientalism*. Said's writings on music and his work with Daniel Barenboim – an important and often neglected side of his polymath career - are passed over in silence.

The key divergences between Hitchens and Said are less over culture than over politics. The reader senses both Hitchens' respect for his friend's towering intellect and his recurrent feeling that Said, over-influenced by both Marxist orthodoxy and its successor political correctness, was unwilling to be too hard on either Stalinism or political Islam: 'Edward didn't feel himself quite at liberty to say certain things'. Hitchens observes tellingly: 'his life – the life of the mind, the life of the book collector and music lover ... would become simply unlivable and unthinkable in an Islamic republic' (391), adding that 'Edward could only condemn Islamism if it could somehow be blamed on either Israel or the United States or the West, and not as a thing in itself' (393) (this charge, though, does not seem quite consistent with Said's support for Rushdie).

Observing that 'if a difference of principle goes undisguised for any length of time, it will start to compromise and undermine the integrity of a friendship' (396), Hitchens charts the unravelling of his relationship with the Palestinian-American intellectual. Post-9-11, he is unsettled by Said's 'picture of an almost fascist America' (397) and his reluctance to take on Al-Qaeda. The rift finally came soon before Said's death in 2003 from leukaemia (as we now know, cancer provides one of the sadder connections between the two), in an episode which I reproduce in Hitchens' own words. In an article in an obscure London magazine, Said had 'quoted some sentences about the Iraq war that he off-handily described as « racist ». The sentences in question had been written by me ... He had cited the words without naming their author' (397-98). That was the end of the friendship, though hard on the heels of the rift came Said's premature demise. Hitchens retained enough respect for his ex-friend to write him a decent obituary, which he rather understatedly calls 'the best tribute I could manage' (398; [www.slate.com/id/2088944/](http://www.slate.com/id/2088944/)), and to defend his memory and achievement against hard-right slurs of the type 'Edward Said: Professor of Terror' (399). We should, finally, recall in all this, and not forgetting Said's very specific objective positioning vis-à-vis the Middle East through his Palestinian-Christian origins, that the Hitchens-Said breach was about politics, not religion, and about political Islam rather than Islam as such.

The parallel stories of Hitchens' professional and personal relations with Said and Rushdie reflect his necessary engagement as a Western intellectual with the key issues of the postcolonial and globalised world: the early Rushdie and the Said of *Orientalism* are, of course, both bright stars in the firmament of postcolonial studies. The two stories also reflect Hitchens' growing estrangement over time from the (postmodern) left – a political odyssey in which he has been at least in part accompanied by Rushdie, but was not by Said. Where, on the evidence of *Hitch-22*, does Christopher Hitchens stand on the political spectrum today? Some now link him to the New Right, and on his own admission, it was the Iraq war that persuaded him to abandon his long-standing identification with the left: 'I couldn't any longer remain where I was' (307), and thus, at a Labour Party conference in Blackpool, 'I consciously made my last appearance as a man of the Left' (308). However, and despite his passionate defence of the American way of life against the Islamist threat, can someone as ardently secular as Hitchens now be pigeon-holed as being on the right? Today he prefers to define himself as 'liberal' or 'libertarian' – or as a sceptic and 'unbeliever', yet committed, as he affirms at the end of *Hitch-22*, to the cause of 'science and reason' (422): and perhaps he is best now seen as an eclectic libertarian maverick. Nonetheless, and although his explanation of his ideological shift centres on politics, not religion, it is difficult to believe that Hitchens' abandonment of the left is bereft of all connection with the espousal in influential sectors of the Western left of the neo-theocratic notion, light-years removed from Marx, of 'respect for religion'.

Hitchens is, certainly, one in a longish line of twentieth- and twenty-first-century intellectuals who started out on the left but over time ended up distancing themselves from it or rejecting it outright. The ranks of this tendency include Rushdie, Harold Bloom, and two Latin American Nobel laureates, Mario Vargas Llosa and the late Octavio Paz. On the other hand, Hitchens' hero George Orwell, despite almost being killed by the Stalinists in Barcelona, remained loyal to the end to the left, continuing to hope the Spanish republic won its war and denying the charge that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* might be a satire on a Labour government he supported. Equally, one may draw up a counter-list of intellectuals who did not abandon, or have not abandoned, the left, which would certainly include, apart from Said, Raymond Williams, Julio Cortázar, José Saramago or, among the living, Eric Hobsbawm.

The question still has to be asked, though: why does the left end up losing minds of the calibre of Hitchens'? The Hitchens-Rushdie-Said triangular prism is, I suggest, worth focusing on in the new book for the light it can shed on this vexed issue. Has the replacement as dominant belief-system on the Western left of Marxism by postmodernism – of a world-view claiming historical objectivity by a plethora of conflicting subjectivities – been an unmitigated success, or not? Christopher Hitchens' answer is not hard to seek, but he is no longer part of the left, though he still back-handily admires Marx. At all events, his memoir is a timely reminder that on a whole spectrum of vexed and urgent political and cultural issues the jury is still very much out.