

STEPPING BACK FROM THE ABYSS

Bradley C. S. Watson

*Exit Right: The People Who Left the Left
and Reshaped the American Century*

By Daniel Oppenheimer
(New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016)

The rise of American conservatism in the twentieth century was closely intertwined with a most interesting political, personal, and psychological phenomenon: the steady movement of important thinkers and political actors from the left to the right. Writer and filmmaker Daniel Oppenheimer offers a mellifluously written study of six of the most important men who underwent this change—Whittaker Chambers, James Burnham, Ronald Reagan, Norman Podhoretz, David Horowitz, and Christopher Hitchens. Although readers might be familiar with the personal or professional transformations of one or another of his subjects, Oppenheimer allows us to see what they had in common, and what separated them on their political odysseys.

In an era when historians are inclined to insist that the personal is political and the political personal, and to obsess over social history at the expense of the grand narrative of civilizations, Oppenheimer manages to remind us of the power of intimate character studies to enlighten and to infuse political

history with a richness that books written from a higher altitude might miss. And he also encourages us to consider the “what ifs”—the contingencies of the personal and political realms. In so doing, he moves us to humble ourselves before them: what if Whittaker Chambers had been born in a different decade, and therefore had not been in a position to influence the many others who came to see the struggle against the left in his profoundly spiritual terms? What if Ronald Reagan’s movie career had been more successful? What leads men to believe as passionately as they do, and thence to travel down the Damascus Road—and what if they had not?

Oppenheimer’s broad sympathies allow him to observe rather than defend or criticize his subjects. And they also allow him to maintain a genuine empathy for their human struggles, while maintaining a healthy distance from them. He refrains from fashionable but silly reductionism by rejecting any suggestion that his subjects were moved by filthy lucre or other inducements of mere material interest. In Oppenheimer’s estimation, his subjects change because they choose to set their considerable energies on a profoundly different, but wholly genuine, path—one that had been “sublimated by their identification with the Left.”

The author insists that real moral-political

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conviction “should be hard-earned. It should bear the evidence of confrontation with the abyss, of an awareness that the grounds of our beliefs are more contingent than we could possibly ever account for.” There’s undoubtedly too much nihilism in this formulation, too much denigration of providence, and too much denial of the ability of human reason ultimately to grasp the permanent things. But these are quibbles. On the whole, Oppenheimer’s fair-mindedness shines through, and his gentle touch with each of his subjects allows the reader to draw his own conclusions about the ultimate grounds—the first and final causes—of their beliefs.

Few can doubt the moral earnestness of Whittaker Chambers. The writer, editor, and spy would renounce communism and testify against his former comrade-in-arms and traitor Alger Hiss—a change documented in the dense, haunting, unforgettable prose of his eight-hundred-page memoir, *Witness*. Most significantly, Chambers would influence the thinking of generations of important Americans on the nature of the communist menace. Before his turn to the right, he was a tightly wound spring, always impressed by the “seriousness” and “superhuman sacrifice” he saw in his intellectual friends and fellow travelers. He sought a “faith and vision” that gave men a reason to live and die, in a world that was itself dying. It was a faith and vision provided by the Communist Party. In managing a communist cell of government workers in Roosevelt’s Washington of the 1930s, he gave himself over to a cause, and found a reason to go on.

It was a series of epiphanies, rather than a single event, that led him to leave the Party. One was his recognition of the “spark of the divine in the soul” that was denied by Marxist materialism. Such materialism, far from being “a solution to the crisis of moder-

nity,” of which the economic and spiritual miseries of the 1930s were only a sign, was in fact “its most terrible manifestation.” Other epiphanies were triggered by the unremitting cruelties of the Soviet regime: the drips that would, for anyone with eyes to see, become a flood. Oppenheimer reports that Chambers began praying by the late 1930s, as he became a seeker of a God that would not fail. But as he altered course, he remained dedicated to high purposes, and to politics: now he would fight against communism with the same commitment with which he once embraced it.

Like Chambers, James Burnham was an intellectual with deep reserves of emotional and moral energy. With a privileged upbringing that led him to become a professional philosopher, and, by 1929, an NYU faculty member, he cut a more conventional figure than Chambers. But like Chambers, he was seeking order and meaning in the face of their opposites, which he saw all around him. “He wanted to believe. His yearning for system and purpose had been acute before the world plunged into the abyss, and it was no accident that after the crash he’d turned for consultation to his friend and colleague [Sydney] Hook, who was emerging as one of America’s most influential interpreters of Marx.” The overlap between the world of the Trotskyists that he joined and the larger New York artistic and intellectual scene was particularly congenial for a man of Burnham’s training and scholarly disposition.

But ultimately he too experienced epiphanies, great and small, that would redirect his thinking and alter his fundamental beliefs. His “humanistic convictions about art” caused him to see how Marxism fell short of providing a sufficiently rich, much less complete, value system. Like Chambers, he came to see far more in the human experience than Marxism was capable of accounting

for. Added to this was his growing sense by the late 1930s that stability was returning to the capitalist order after the great crash, his increasing awareness of the circularity of Marxist reasoning, and his jolting wake-up call in the form of the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939. Eventually, “almost all of his Marxist hypotheses had been refuted by the data of events.”

In contrast to Chambers and Burnham, Ronald Reagan was no intellectual, though he was an uncommonly smart man. He was a doer more than a thinker—one who was moved by the telling anecdote, the one-liner that cuts to the chase, the experiences of ordinary American life. As he steered from left to right, he would recall and recount such things, finding new and potent meanings in them. For him, America was a morality play where the good guys were routinely threatened, but through the force of argument and conviction, they would triumph in the end.

From his father, Reagan developed an early antipathy toward the perverse incentives of the administrative state, which discouraged able-bodied Depression-era men from working even when they could find a job. For him, the “personal, moral, and political all centrifuged together in a tight parable of conservative wisdom,” such that his transformation from a young FDR man to one of the twentieth century’s most towering conservative figures did not in fact involve much change, at least in his own telling. “In Reagan’s conversion story there was no conversion at all. There was, instead, a creep of beliefs, friendships, history, and circumstance,” all congealing into a patriotism of the common man. Even his tumultuous forays into Hollywood union politics seemed not to dampen his spirit, but only strengthen his resolve. Despite being the target of epithets from the communist left that would make even a contemporary campus protester

blush—not to mention death threats serious enough to cause him to carry a gun—he never lost his belief in the genuine goodness of his country. Like Chambers, whose *Witness* he read on its publication in 1952, Reagan became convinced that the fight against communism was a fight for nothing less than the soul of men created in the image and likeness of God. And *Witness* was a book whose prose and cadences he would rely on in speechmaking throughout his life.

Norman Podhoretz’s turn was not from communists who would demand his loyalty or threaten his life but from liberals who, by the 1950s, had promoted—and ensconced themselves and their elite compatriots in—a political consensus at once comprehensive and stultifying, to the point that they could barely imagine an intellectually serious opposition. As the young, ambitious editor of the increasingly influential *Commentary* magazine, Podhoretz found himself on a mission to find something interesting to say—to challenge orthodoxy. If Oppenheimer’s descriptive and analytic powers fail him in any substantial way, it is here, in his account of Podhoretz, where he seems to lose energy and to succumb too quickly to the temptation to reduce Podhoretz’s political change to his restless ambition, and his desire for “clarity” about fundamental matters that liberalism eschewed in its worship of the jealous god of “complexity.” These thoughts are evocative, but there is surely much more that needs to be said. Podhoretz needs to be taken off the analyst’s couch and interrogated by someone more fully versed in political ideas.

Oppenheimer rounds out his analysis with treatments of two more contemporary figures: the writers David Horowitz and Christopher Hitchens. Horowitz—a creator of the 1960s more than a product of it—was a red diaper baby whose move to the right

was triggered by the inescapable reality of the ideological violence and unscrupulous cruelty of the radicals with whom he associated. Seeking a “redemptive vision” in the Black Panthers, he raised money for their cause, witnessed their celebration of violence, and experienced their commission of it. Betty Van Patter had worked for Horowitz at his left-wing *Ramparts* magazine, and he’d recommended her to the Panthers as a bookkeeper. When her bloodied and beaten body turned up in San Francisco Bay in 1975, the political became personal for Horowitz in a visceral way; the need for atonement became paramount. Only months earlier, at the funeral of a young Panther, he had cried for the dead, for the children still living—and for himself. “*David, what are you doing here?*” he asked himself, in teary silence. He knew then that he was complicit in something unspeakable, and that he could never go back. Like Podhoretz, his boundless intellectual ambition demanded fresh targets. One of them would be himself, stripped and ruthlessly dissected in his memoir *Radical Son: A Generational Odyssey*. The book is a painful read, but one whose literary power sometimes approaches that of *Witness*. By 1984—less than a decade after that awful discovery in the Bay—Horowitz reports that he “walked into the voting booth and, without hesitation, punched the line marked ‘Ronald Reagan.’”

Oppenheimer makes an interesting choice in selecting Hitchens as his last subject. Hitchens could hardly be categorized as a conservative even at—perhaps especially at—his death in 2011. But he did relish combat with liberals, and like the others in the book, he was a morally earnest man. He possessed the honesty and discipline not to allow moral reality to escape his ken. As an expatriate Brit, an unrepentant atheist, socialist, and intellectual bon vivant, Hitch-

ens seemed an unlikely foil for the American left. But that is exactly what he became—and then some—after 9/11. He never lacked passion to pursue the truth as he saw it, and he felt liberated, and obligated, to do so when his adopted country was attacked. He had arrived two decades earlier to work for *The Nation*, the flagship journal of the American left. But the manifest horrors of radical Islam caused him to turn against—with his biting, inimitable literary style—former friends and fellow travelers. He was a man who lived to fight and was easily bored by conventional ideas. The uniquely deadly fanaticism he saw in Islam led him to full engagement on many intellectual fronts, becoming a kind of leftist neoconservative when it came to American foreign policy under George W. Bush. In Oppenheimer’s words, “Iraq was to be one of Hitchens’s Orwell moments.... Hitchens saw that the fascism his country was fighting against was so great an evil that there was no other choice, in the end, but to throw in on the side of flawed but redeemable liberal democracy.... And for Hitchens, as for Orwell, half the fun of the refreshingly simple choice was the license it gave him to unleash the patriotism that his cosmopolitan conscience had been holding in check for decades.”

Oppenheimer ends his book with a post-script that reiterates his opening insistence that he is really chronicling six men who peered into the abyss “at the most terrifyingly fundamental level.” In fact, they all seemed to have stepped back from it, for reasons perhaps more scrutable than Oppenheimer suggests. They underwent similar transformations only because something within them pointed in a common direction. As Robert Louis Stevenson might have said of them, “if I could show you these men and women, all the world over, in every stage of history, under every abuse of error, under

every circumstance of failure, without hope, without help, without thanks, still obscurely fighting the lost fight of virtue, still clinging... to some rag of honour, the poor jewel of their souls! They may seek to escape, and yet they cannot; it is not alone their privilege and glory, but their doom; they are

condemned to some nobility; all their lives long, the desire of good is at their heels, the implacable hunter." In the juxtapositions Oppenheimer so ably lays out, the reader cannot help but gain some version of this insight—which is not quite of the sort the author intends. †

A FULLY ASSOCIATED SENSIBILITY

William Bedford Clark

A Journey of the Mind: Collected Poems of Helen Pinkerton, 1945–2016
(Newberg, OR: Wiseblood Books, 2016)

In these disordered and disorderly times when we seem on the cusp of some new dark age, I find myself coming back more often than I like to the final lines of Pope's *Dunciad*:

Lo! thy dread empire Chaos! is restored:
Light dies before thy uncreating word;
Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain
fall,
And universal darkness buries all.

Of course, the darkness of de-creation, however dark, is not universal. Helen Pinkerton's poems maintain the light and warmth of reason, balance, and craft, in keeping with the dictates of her friend and mentor Yvor Winters, and this generous selection of her

verse, spanning seven decades, is an occasion for celebration and gratitude. In "Red-Tailed Hawk," Pinkerton offers an implicit antidote to Pope's horror at the dying Light. The eponymous bird soars on the up-thrust of an invisible, but wholly sufficient, thermal:

Out of my sight, taking a certain path,
Knowing from ancient blood, instinctive
might,
How to survive beyond the present drift,
He seemed to shift from nothingness
toward flight.

Yet it was real, the warm column of air—
Like being, unrecorded, always there.

The word "being" in the final line might be more properly rendered *Being*, for Pinkerton is a religious poet, not merely a "spiritual" one, though her brand of neoscholastic faith is anything but facile and pietistic. For her, the unseen and too often "unrecorded" (unacknowledged) power that ensures deliverance "beyond the present drift" is the God who

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