

ESSAYS

Hitchens's passion for polemics

Letters to a Young Contrarian

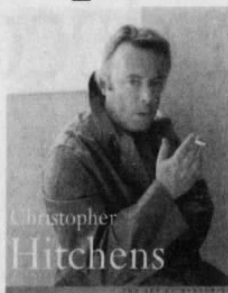
By Christopher Hitchens
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By John H. Summers

Soon after Henry Thoreau died in 1862, his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson was moved to depict his quarrelsome character. "There was something military in his nature," Emerson recollected, sounding a note of exasperation, "not to be subdued, always manly and able, but rarely tender, as if he did not feel himself except in opposition. He wanted a fallacy to expose, a blunder to pillory, I may say required a little sense of victory, a roll of the drum, to call his powers into full exercise . . . It seemed as if his first instinct on hearing a proposition was to controvert it, so impatient was he of the limitations of our daily thought. This habit, of course, is a little chilling to the social affections."

It is a habit worth cultivating anyway, writes journalist Christopher Hitchens in "Letters to a Young Contrarian," a slim volume of 18 epistles aimed at college students. For whatever the consolations of human fellowship, its "affectations" tend to tranquilize free intelligence. Hitchens indeed fends off the now common complaints of severity, impatience, and showmanship, and presents a compelling case on behalf of "the decision to live at a slight acute angle to society." Cultivating a reflexively oppositional style, he argues, is commendable on its own merits. It is also necessary for the pursuit of an ideal foundation that seems perpetually to slip away from the individuals who chase it: "living a life that would be, as far as possible, self-determined." Hitchens thereby renews the themes of moral individualism and charismatic defiance that Thoreau so marvelously expressed in "Civil Disobedience."

To say that Hitchens brings practical experience to bear on his mentorship to would-be dissenters is to understate the situation rather dramatically. A British-born journalist, he has, since 1995, published lacerating polemics against Henry Kissinger, Bill Clinton, and Mother Teresa,



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charging them in turn with legal, moral, and spiritual malfeasance. His frequent columns in *The Nation* and *Vanity Fair* hold forth against cowardice, hypocrisy, venality, and stupidity, evidence for which Hitchens continually rediscovers in American public culture. It seems almost superfluous to add that a number of the powerful people he has affronted have repaid his vitriol in kind, but for the fact that several public contretemps have resulted. Recently, he induced Kissinger to issue a retraction for falsely defaming him on national television. In 1998, he filed an affidavit with the House of Representatives impeachment managers, breaking ranks not only with his liberal and leftist allies but also with Sidney Blumenthal, a longtime friend and presidential aide whom Hitchens characterized as Clinton's conspirator against truth. The most generous of his many critics have wondered whether he so delights in destroying illusions and bearing moral witness that he disregards the painful consequences of his campaigns.

"Conflict may be painful," answers Hitchens in Letter IV, "but the painless solution does not exist in any case and the pursuit of it leads to the painful outcome of mindlessness and pointlessness; the apotheosis of the ostrich." A life organized around struggle, conflict, and tension at the expense of solidarity promises few consolations. But the "art of challenging what is appealing" yields its own rewards, he insists, among

them the kind of simple dignity unavailable under the cover of masses.

So understood, attacks against the icons of society — such as Mother Teresa — are undertaken not merely for spectacle. They hope to demonstrate how, without opposition to flattery, the degradations of passivity and acquiescence to power tend to follow. "One must have the nerve to assert that, while people are entitled to their illusions, they are not entitled to a limitless enjoyment of them and they are not entitled to impose them on others. Allow a friend to believe in a bogus prospectus or a false promise and you cease, after a short while, to be a friend at all." If the spirit of this advice feels familiar, that is because the romantic slogans of the Enlightenment stand back of it: Lies make you sick, and the truth shall set you free.

One would hardly know from "Letters to a Young Contrarian," however, that such assumptions about truth, conscience, and freedom have suffered serious attack in modern intellectual culture. Hitchens writes as if no significant debates have occurred about these matters. Because his letters do not patiently craft arguments, instead relying heavily on epigrams and assertions, some of his substantive advice necessarily fails to satisfy the critical scruples it recommends.

In Letter IX, for example, Hitchens treats allegiance to religious belief as "positively harmful" to the human mind. What mental freedom his anti-theism wins him, however, he casually hands over to scientific progress, a faith equally capable of seducing the mind into blind acquiescence. "We still inhabit the pre-history of our race, and have not caught up with the immense discoveries about our own nature and about the nature of the universe," he writes. "The unspooling of the skein of the genome has effectively abolished racism and creationism, and the amazing findings of Hubble and Hawking have allowed us to guess at the origins of the cosmos."

Odd that Hitchens should fall prey to the crude 18th-century mistake of confusing moral and scientific progress. Despite his protests against fixed or conscript-

ed intellectual alignments — "distrust any speaker who talks confidently about 'we,' or speaks in the name of 'us' — when he writes of "progress" he appears as reliably conformist as anyone.

Yet perhaps reading faithfully in the epistolary form requires the temporary suspension of conventional criteria. The mentor-reader relationship offers instead the prospect of being affected, or affirmed. Those already disinclined toward Hitchens's style naturally will believe him poor company in this respect. It requires no great insight to realize that his view of collective life as tending toward the degrading and the coercive may invite a moral aristocracy in relief, nor to understand that a life bereft of illusions is perhaps itself an illusion — one all the worse for its presumption that inflicting pain on one's friends is necessary for a dignified existence.

Considerably more difficult to see is that Hitchens seeks opponents, not enemies. Here lies the real contribution of "Letters to a Young Contrarian," a book that knows the differences between acquiescence and restraint. Hitchens praises proportion, patience, generosity, and self-criticism. The life he favors seeks not thoughtlessness but thoughtfulness and deliberation. "To be in opposition is not to be a nihilist. And there is no way of making a living at it. It is something you are, not something you do."

What Emerson gladly conceded to Thoreau's example, one may therefore say with only slight exaggeration of Hitchens's advice: "He declined to give up his large ambition of knowledge and action for any narrow craft or profession, aiming at a much more comprehensive calling, the art of living well. If he slighted or defied the opinions of others, it was only that he was more intent to reconcile his practice with his own belief."

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