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Out of the Woodstock, Hiss and Chambers

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Whittaker Chambers

Once more, the pas de deux of Whittaker Chambers and Alger Hiss — the bad teeth, the old Ford, the Bokhara rug, the hollow pumpkin, Woodstock typewriters moving around in the night like cats.

Another tendentious book on the famous case has just been published—"Alger Hiss: The True Story" by John Chabot Smith (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, $15). Mr. Smith, who covered both perjury trials in 1949-50 for The New York Herald Tribune, belongs to the Ptolemaic school. That is, the fixed center of his universe is the innocence of Mr. Hiss. All else revolves around this blamelessness. If there are irregularities of orbit, peculiar motions in the evidentiary stars, wobbles of fact, he will explain them away with a web of ingenious could-have-might have-beens, a net of pretzels.

Later this year. Allen Weinstein, a Smith College professor of history, will publish his account, "Perjury: The Hiss-Chambers Conflict." After examining the papers of the Hiss defense team and the pertinent Federal Bureau of Investigation files, Mr. Weinstein is convinced that Mr. Hiss "stole the documents in question and that Whittaker Chambers told the truth."

Not surprisingly, Mr. Weinstein has reviewed Mr. Smith's book, and savaged it. Rather surprisingly, he did so for the April 1 issue of The New York Review of Books. Since The New York Review is usually perceived to be for the American left what Jane's Fighting Ships is for navy buffs, one might have expected more sympathy for Mr. Hiss in its pages. Not so. Nor, as we shall see, was it ever so.

'Man of Honor'

As if two new books weren't enough, the late Lionel Trilling's only novel, "The Middle of the Journey," was reprinted in paperback last month (Avon, $3.95) and will be reissued in hardcover next week (Scribner's, $8.95). It originally appeared in 1947. One of its principal characters, Gifford Maxim, is clearly modeled on Chambers. Lionel Trilling acknowledged as much in an article published a year ago—in, again, The New York Review of Books—which is now the introduction to the new edition of the novel.

The Trilling should put Chambers in a novel is mildly interesting should go otu of his way to tell the readers of The New York Review that "it is still possible to say that he was a man of honor," that "in Whittaker Chambers there was much to befaulted, but nothing I know of him has ever led me to doubt his magnanimous intention," is much more interesting. He had chosen sides.

And it was also in the pages of The New York Review that the art historian Meyer Shapiro roughed up another of Mr. Hiss's advocates in 1967. Dr. Meyer A. Zeligs had concluded in "Friendship and Fratricide" that Chambers was a psychopathic personality because of childhood traumas, which is why he told lies. Mr. Schapiro, who had known Chambers for most of his adult life, disagreed at length. And what about the childhood traumas of Mr. Hiss—a father and a sister who both committed suicide, an older brother who died young?

This is not a review of the books and articles on the Hiss case. Having been Zeligsized, Cruise O'Briened, Jowitted and Cooked, one would prefer on the whole to review ex-wives or Philadelphia. The ineffable is tedious. But it should be worth thinking about why so many literary intelleotuals, against the ideological grain, have sided with Chambers, who would have embarrassed them at their dinner parties. To be sure, they do not seem to have liked him—ambivalence is their hobby horse—but they believed and were fascinated by him. In some significant way, he was more "real" than Hiss to them, and not only because he was so much better a writer.

Identified With Gerontion

"Such peculiar birds are found only in the trees of the revolution," said Arthur Koestler of Chambers. "You have not come back from hell with empty hands," said André Malraux after "Witness." "He seems to have been, like Scott Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby, the product of his own Platonic conception of himself," said Murray Kempton. In 1950. Leslie Fiedler wrote: "Something in his temperament seems to have greeted the prospect of self-immolation: even before he entered what the Communists mean by the 'underground,' he had been, in the Dostoyevskian sense, an underground man, his own enemy. It had apparently pleased him to take the final step, to become one whose death it would be forbidden to notice." "A tragic comedian," said Trilling.

Like Trilling, they were putting him into a novel, although it was a novel written by somebody else. Mr. Kempton went so far as to put him and Mr. Hiss in a novel by Ellen Glasgow, "The Sheltered Life." Chambers would not have approved. He considered himself "the horrid brat of historicity." He identified with Gerontion: "Not good company this side of the Styx." His poets were Rilke ("every angel is terrible") and Lorca ("on awaiting, with a little patience, the black angel"). At the end of his life, he was learning Chinese, studying biology and explaining to anyone who would listen that Allen Ginsberg was the only genuine talent in the literary generation of the Beats.

He also had a sense of humor. To William F. Buckley Jr., he wrote during the Eisenhower days: "Mr. Dulles was in Peru (what on earth could have taken him there—hints from the Incas on how to lose an empire?)." That aspect of him is not acknowledged by the literary intellectuals. Trilling speaks of "a sensibility which was all too accessible to large solemnities and to the more facile parodoxes of spirituality," a mind "too easily seduced into equating portentous utterance with truth," "a forbidding drabness." Mr. Fiedler describes "the informer driven to mortify himself and to harm those he still loved." Mr. Kempton noticed "the guilt of the man repossessed by the sense of sin looking at the man who is still free from it."

But perhaps we're getting somewhere. Trilling has Chambers-Maxim declare that "the Renaissance is dead," which is much the same thing as saying that the Enlightenment and the 19th-century novel are dead: "The supreme act of the humanistic intelligence—it perceives the cogency of the argument and acquiesces in the fact of its own extinction." Mr. Kempton, thinking about Communists, suggests: "It may or may not be debatable whether a man can live without God; but, if it were possible, we should pass a law forbidding a man to live without a sense of sin."

Risk of Zeligsizing

Indeed, thinking about the 1930's, Mr. Kempton is eloquent: "We were, most of us, fleeing the reality that man is alone upon this earth. We ran from a fact of solitude to a myth of community. That myth failed us because the moments of test come more often when we are alone and far from home and even the illusion of community is not here to sustain us. . . . Whittaker Chambers cried out that he had left the winning side for the losing one, not as an expression of historical prophecy, but, because he believed, in his Communist phase, that he was part of a great company; and he knew, in his apostasy, that he was all alone."

At the risk of Zeligsizing, one is tempted to suggest that Chambers enthralls a number of literary intellectuals because he exemplified the antihero they were teaching in their courses on the literature of Modernism: the rampant self, the "spoiled priest," the extravagant sinner, the undergrounder, outsider, stranger. According to the antihero, community is a fraud, against the soul. We die alone. The translator of "Bambi" and the author of "witness" walked right out of Dostoyevsky, Baudelaire, Kafka, Eliot and Joyce and into their classrooms: "It seems," Chambers said, "as if, by the fretting of raw edges, there arises a peculiar music: we do not know how." He was the text, as Mr. Hiss was the student. Sin is choice, a sort of freedom with consequences.

A man, wrote Chambers, might be murdered meaninglessly: "This reality cuts across our mind like a wound whose edges crave to heal, but cannot. Thus, one of the great sins, perhaps the great sin, is to say: It will heal; it has healed; there is no wound; there is something more important than this wound. There is nothing more important than this wound." The testimony of Chambers was read by many of us as if it were a novel by Camus or Mann, and reviewed by professors of Modernism as though, astonishingly, their lessons had come to life, were real, like the sun and the tiger and the lamb and the wound.